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Mrs C Wagstaff
Headteacher
St Nicolas' Church of England Combined School
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Dear Mrs Wagstaff

Short inspection of St Nicolas' Church of England Combined School

Following my visit to the school on 21 February 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in February 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. When you were appointed, you recognised that standards had dipped slightly. School self-evaluation is accurate. Together with your governors, you have identified the strengths and weaknesses of the school correctly. Your school improvement plan sets out the most important areas for the school to focus on to bring about further improvement.

St Nicolas' School strives to 'encourage all to flourish as unique individuals'. One parent commented: 'The school has an inclusive ethos and welcomes all.' You have placed a high priority on ensuring that pupils know and understand the school's values of 'Love, friendship, respect, honesty, courage, thankfulness and peace' which permeate the school. Pupils also have a good understanding of the importance of respecting, accepting and tolerating the views and beliefs of others, which shows that the school is actively promoting British values. You have high expectations of social behaviour. Respect and courtesy are the norm between pupils and adults alike. The school's focus on the well-being of every child is palpable. The work that is being carried out to support pupils to believe they can achieve is successfully helping pupils to have positive attitudes to learning. Pupils enjoy coming to school. This is reflected in the attendance figures, including for disadvantaged pupils, which have improved year on year.

School leaders know that there is more to be done to fully address the areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection. Much has been achieved:

standards in writing continue to be above the national averages; teaching assistants support pupils' learning well in lessons; pupils say they are provided with work that challenges them and helps them to think more deeply about their writing; their presentation and handwriting have improved and the proportion of pupils achieving the higher standard by the end of Year 6 is above the national average. But you know that teaching is not yet outstanding. You are working well with teachers to support their training and development. Senior leaders model effective practice and support staff well to hone and develop their teaching skills. You are working to increase the skills of middle leaders because you know that their contribution to school improvement is limited at present. You have recently established a new curriculum leader to develop and support subject leaders in their responsibilities to improve outcomes for pupils in their areas of responsibility.

Governors support the school well and check that policies and procedures are being implemented effectively. They take time to visit the school to verify whether the priorities in the school improvement plan are being addressed. Governors have a good understanding of the achievement of different groups of pupils in each class. This is because you provide them with detailed assessment information, which helps them to raise questions and check whether pupils are making the progress they should.

Senior leaders recognised that a more effective tracking system for recording assessments of pupils' achievements was required. This has now been put in place, but is evolving and being refined, to provide more accurate information for senior leaders, governors and teaching staff about the achievement of different groups of pupils across the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils have a good understanding about how to keep themselves safe. They feel safe in school. As one pupil put it: 'I feel protected when I'm in school.' They know that adults are on hand to listen to them and deal with any concerns they may experience. Pupils have a good understanding of what constitutes different types of bullying and they understand how to keep safe when using the internet and social media. The recent Internet Safety Day served to inform parents and carers, as well as pupils, about the importance of internet safety for all the family. Pupils learn how to keep safe when riding their bicycles and know that the lockdown procedures and fire drills help them to know what to do should an emergency situation arise.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. All the appropriate checks and vetting procedures are carried out prior to appointment for all adults. Training and update information are provided regularly for all staff, including volunteers, to make sure everyone fully understands their responsibilities to keep pupils safe. Thorough and detailed records show that school leaders act appropriately and seek to resolve any issues that may arise. Governors fulfil their statutory duties and ensure that the school's safeguarding arrangements are effective.

Inspection findings

- Outcomes for pupils in the Year 1 phonics screening check in 2017 were disappointing. You took decisive action to address this issue by providing training for teachers and teaching assistants in the correct pronunciation of phonemes and providing them with the knowledge and skills they need to teach phonics effectively. This is helping pupils to blend and segment words correctly. The most recent assessments are showing positive signs, with a higher proportion of Year 1 pupils on track to reach the expected standard. But you are not complacent. Where pupils are struggling, additional support is provided to help them to catch up.
- Senior leaders check regularly on the achievement of different groups of pupils and carry out effective analysis of outcomes for pupils in all classes. The regular meetings you have with teachers, to discuss pupils' progress and highlight individual pupils who are underachieving, identify additional strategies to raise standards. Last year, outcomes for girls were not as strong as for boys at the end of Year 6 in reading, writing and mathematics. This is not the case currently. You make sure that teachers plan learning appropriately for all groups of pupils.
- There are comparatively few disadvantaged pupils, including most-able disadvantaged pupils, at St Nicolas'. Nevertheless, school leaders and teachers know these pupils well and monitor their progress carefully to make sure that the difference between their achievement and the achievement of other pupils is diminishing.
- A few parents raised concerns about some aspects of the school's work. The concerns raised were tested out during the inspection. Inspection evidence confirms that school leaders, governors and staff work together effectively to provide a good quality of education for all pupils. The overwhelming majority of parents are happy with the education, pastoral care and support provided for their children. One parent's comments reflected the views of many: 'The school provides a caring and nurturing environment where children feel safe, confident and happy – learning is both challenging and enjoyable.'
- Pupils say they enjoy the challenging activities teachers plan for them. The new assessment system school leaders have put in place is beginning to provide teachers with more precise information about pupils' next steps in learning. However, this is at an early stage of development and teachers are not routinely identifying the exact challenge required to make sure all pupils make strong progress over time.
- Since your appointment in 2016, you have taken steps to build the capacity of senior and middle leaders by providing training and support to increase their knowledge and skills. This is helping to broaden their understanding. But this is at an early stage of development. Some middle leaders are relatively new to their roles and responsibilities. As a result, they do not yet influence school improvement strongly enough.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- assessments of pupils' learning are further refined to make sure that teachers sharpen the challenge for all groups of pupils to enable them to make strong progress over time
- the skills of middle leaders are developed effectively to enable them to take a full part in bringing about improvement in their areas of responsibility.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Oxford, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Buckinghamshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ann Henderson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, your deputy headteacher, four subject leaders, the chair of governors and five governors, your school business manager, a group of pupils, two grandparent helpers and an officer from the Diocese of Oxford. I had a telephone conversation with your school improvement adviser. I scrutinised a range of documents, including information on pupils' achievement, the school's self-evaluation and school development and improvement plan, external reports and documentation relating to safeguarding. Pupils' progress in their learning over time was checked by looking at their work in books. I observed pupils' learning in lessons with your deputy headteacher. This included observing three phonics sessions.