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7 February 2017

Mr Dungate  
Headteacher  
St. Mark's Primary School  
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Tunbridge Wells  
Kent  
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Dear Mr Dungate

### **Short inspection of St Mark's Church of England Primary School**

Following my visit to the school on 24 January 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. This visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in May 2013.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

You and your staff are committed to continuous improvements so that you can meet the diverse and, at times, complex needs of your pupils. You are committed to the provision of an inclusive education in which all pupils are happy and cared for well. Pupils are encouraged to actively participate and take risks in their learning but receive help when they cannot meet these challenges. They recognise that they are nurtured and supported to do their best. They and their parents are understandably very pleased.

You and governors work together effectively to seek out new opportunities to improve the learning of pupils. You are well supported by a highly skilled senior team who share your commitment and ambition for the pupils, and are passionate in their efforts to secure further progress. You all share the same vision, which is also understood and put into practice by the staff team as a whole. The impact of your leadership is evident in the learning environment and experiences for pupils who are currently in the school. Your work is highly valued by all.

The last inspection report recommended that pupils should have more opportunities to investigate real-life situations and develop more independent ways of recording their answers. It added that they should have more regular and sustained periods of time to act upon advice given to them by teachers. This has been very well achieved. Pupils were seen enthusiastically discussing their work. They could describe what they were learning and the targets they had been set to improve their work. They had time to reflect on their learning, to respond to advice given to

them, as well as having opportunities to apply new skills to a range of problems and real-life situations.

We also discussed some areas for continuing development. You have responded rapidly to the most recent results from national tests and assessments and have worked hard with staff this year to improve the progress of all pupils in all year groups. You are helping pupils to develop greater resilience so that they can show their skills more confidently in test situations. You have introduced new strategies and resources for reading, mathematics and phonics, and have secure plans in place to develop these further.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Safeguarding is a strength in the school. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. All school policies and practices support the culture of safety. Any pupils who need particular support receive it in a timely way. Your staff work effectively with pupils, parents and families, and with external agencies to protect children and keep them safe.

Pupils feel safe and are taught to stay safe. They speak eloquently of the happy and safe environment in which they learn. They feel a sense of responsibility to care for others and to make sure that they are not discriminated against or left out. Some pupils take responsibility for the care of younger pupils in their role as school buddies. Pupils behave well, both in classrooms and around the school. They enjoy the lunchtime sporting activities which allow pupils of different ages to play together. They are confident that adults look after them and respond to any concerns or worries they may have.

Parents describe the school as a 'lovely, safe and caring' environment where their children are happy and confident. Clear values, such as kindness and respect for each other, alongside their normal education, were described as wonderful.

### **Inspection findings**

- I agreed to focus on the following areas with the school at the start of the inspection: the extent to which the pupil premium strategy is having an impact on the attendance, engagement and progress of disadvantaged pupils; the actions that leaders have taken in response to declining key stage 1 phonics outcomes and if an improvement in pupils use of phonics is evident; how well early years foundation stage provision prepares children for the next stage in their learning; how well the effective approaches to teaching writing in key stage 2 are raising standards in other subjects, particularly in mathematics.
- In 2016, a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils did not attend school as regularly as they should. Test results last year also suggested that disadvantaged pupils underperformed significantly in reading and mathematics. We examined the progress of pupils currently in the school and looked at work in their books. Better teaching, based on a clearer understanding of pupils'

starting points, is leading to improvements in their learning.

- I met with your attendance leader. It is clear that she works closely with families and outside agencies to help pupils to attend regularly and on time. Through your school newsletter and Friday assemblies, you are keeping pupils and their parents aware of the importance of coming to school every day.
- The school has a good reputation in the community for nurturing pupils with additional needs and those who are disadvantaged. As a result, many pupils with complex needs join the school. During the inspection, I saw pupils being supported in the nurture room, being given one-to-one attention and others receiving help in small intervention groups or within the classroom. Evidently, the staff are committed to the school's vision and believe that all pupils can make good progress and engage fully in their learning.
- Not enough pupils reach the expected standard in the phonics screening check by the end of Year 1, and this then affects their reading ability. You agreed, and told me, that your school leaders have already identified this as a priority. New teaching strategies have been introduced in Reception and Year 1 to ensure greater consistency and a systematic approach to teaching phonics. Pupils learn through music, sound and action, and extend their learning in afternoon activities. The appointment of specialist staff and the use of intervention sessions provide more routine support to prevent pupils from falling behind. However, some of the teaching observed did not accurately meet the needs of pupils. Consequently, some pupils did not concentrate as well as they should.
- The provision in early years was seen to be strong at the time of the last inspection, but there had been some decline in outcomes which meant that fewer children were well prepared to start Year 1 than in the past. However, leaders know the needs of children very well and understand how to promote their physical and emotional development in early years effectively. The indoor and outdoor learning spaces give children opportunities to experience a wide range of developmental activities, including those promoting literacy and numeracy. During child-initiated learning, boys and girls participate together in a wide range of activities. In some more formal phonics sessions, some children did not engage fully, needing greater support from other adults in the room to help them with their learning. Although teaching at this time did not precisely match their current development, this was addressed during the day with additional support and intervention.
- I examined the quality of teaching and learning in key stage 2, since pupils had obtained good writing scores in last year's national assessments, but scores were lower in other areas. You were surprised and disappointed by these results but have quickly worked with other leaders to analyse the reasons for these outcomes, and to make changes. Staff have had additional training and support and new teaching methods have been introduced. Pupils and parents were able to describe the benefits of these changes, and work in pupils' books shows the better progress pupils are now making.
- Parents and pupils are fully involved in the changes you have introduced. For example, pupils can now attend a book club and have access to a wider range of reading materials to enhance their reading skills. Reading is now taught more

effectively from an earlier stage and, thus, pupils are more able to respond to texts and infer meaning. Spelling and mathematics challenges, which develop basic skills, have been embraced by both parents and pupils. In mathematics, teachers use assessment information more rigorously to plan activities that meet the needs of pupils. Teachers ensure that pupils have secure basic skills, and then help them to talk about their understanding of mathematical concepts and how to use this to solve problems. In lessons, pupils were seen to be resilient and able to use their mistakes as a means of improving their learning. School leaders acknowledge that some aspects of the curriculum need improving further, particularly in mathematics. Leaders are confident that this will happen, as all members of the school community are united in their ambition to achieve this. However, the impact of the new mathematics strategy introduced by leaders has not yet been evaluated.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils acquire skills in phonics more rapidly so that more pupils develop reading skills at an earlier age
- the significant changes made to the teaching of mathematics are evaluated effectively and have a positive impact on pupils' progress and attainment.

Yours sincerely

Ann McCarthy  
**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, I held discussions with you, your deputy and other school leaders about your plans for improvement and your evaluation of the school's effectiveness. I also had a meeting with your governors and a phone call conversation with an officer of the local authority. I visited classes and intervention sessions with the deputy headteacher where I observed teaching, spoke to pupils and examined written work. I met with a group of Year 6 pupils and I spoke with parents. I looked carefully at the 77 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I also considered confidential responses from pupils and members of staff to Ofsted's questionnaire. I evaluated documents related to school improvement, safeguarding, pupils' progress and attendance.