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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Kerry Malcolm
Headteacher
St Lawrence Church of England Primary School, Rowhedge
Rectory Road
Rowhedge
Colchester
Essex
CO5 7HR

Dear Mrs Malcolm

Short inspection of St Lawrence Church of England Primary School, Rowhedge

Following my visit to the school on 6 February 2019, 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 November 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your leaders are deeply committed to the school and have high aspirations for pupils and staff. You are keen to share and draw upon good practice to help you to improve the school by forging beneficial partnerships with organisations such as the local consortium of schools and the university. In this way you ensure that the school continues to improve.

Leaders have created an ethos where the well-being of pupils and families is paramount. They are determined to ensure that pupils respect each other and can flourish within a safe and positive climate for learning. Staff have successfully ensured that pupils understand and accept differences between each other so that all feel welcome and included. For example, in their discussions with me, pupils showed empathy for those who need more help than others and explained how well adults support these pupils. As one pupil said, 'teachers help them amazingly'. This view was typical. The vast majority of pupils said that they enjoy coming to school because teachers make learning fun across a wide range of subjects. Another pupil commented, 'I like the variety of what we do in lessons, like different ways of learning spellings.'

Leaders know the school community very well and are quick to offer support where there is a need. Parents appreciate how approachable staff are and recognise that the school is led and managed well. As one commented in Parent View, Ofsted's

online questionnaire, 'I can't praise this school enough. They have a fantastic staff team who are always available and cater to each child's needs.' This is typical of the many complimentary comments made by parents who value good communication, the 'fantastic progress' which children make and the way concerns are resolved promptly.

You have successfully created a dedicated team of staff who work productively together to improve the progress of every pupil in the school. Well-organised systems for training staff ensure that teachers and teaching assistants are continually honing their skills and knowledge. For example, the leadership team recently provided a programme of staff training in mathematics which has had a positive effect on pupils' progress and interest in mathematics. All staff who responded to Ofsted's questionnaire agreed that the school is led well and that they are well supported in their work. They said that they enjoy working at the school.

Leaders and governors have addressed the areas for improvement which were highlighted in the previous inspection effectively. The school was first asked to improve the presentation in pupils' books. Staff have dealt with this well and the work we saw in pupils' exercise books was neat and well-organised. Another area for improvement was to ensure that teachers use assessment to check how well pupils are doing and plan work which will help them to achieve even better. In response, leaders introduced an effective system where senior staff, teachers and teaching assistants thoroughly and regularly check pupils' learning together. You were able to show me that this is leading to pupils' strong progress by drawing upon the school's improving internal assessment information. We also saw evidence of this in our joint observations of teaching.

The previous inspection identified the need to strengthen the governors' contribution to school improvement by ensuring that they know how well the school is doing. Governors acted swiftly to make the necessary improvements. They know the school well because they make regular monitoring visits which focus on the main aspects of the school's work such as the teaching of phonics, and health and safety. They have set up effective systems which enable leaders to provide them with timely information for discussion at meetings. They are confident to hold leaders to account for the improvements they are making in the school, thereby contributing appropriately to school improvement.

You know the school well and have an accurate understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. The school improvement plan includes the correct priorities for improvement, together with appropriate actions, which ensure that leaders sustain a good quality of education. However, the plans for improvement are too broad and attempt to focus on too many things at once. Timescales are vague and it is not clear who is responsible for carrying out actions or for checking that they have the desired effect. Therefore, while it is clear that the school is continuing to improve, improvements are not as rapid as they could be.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You and your staff place a high priority on the safeguarding of pupils. Checks on employees' and volunteers' suitability to work with pupils are thorough. Safeguarding records are well organised and detailed. They show that concerns are followed up appropriately. You work well with external agencies to ensure that pupils and families receive the timely support they need. You were able to give me many examples demonstrating how pupils' lives had been improved through effective team working. You ensure that staff are well trained and that their training is routinely updated. Staff are aware of the potential risks to pupils and know what to do if they have a concern.

Pupils are confident that the school is a safe place to be and that they are looked after well by staff. Most believe that there is little bullying because, 'adults are there before you even know!' As one pupil said: 'Staff are always there to help you. No matter where you are, there is always an adult there. They really care for you and always have time.' This view was typical of most pupils. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about the steps taken by you and your staff to keep them safe online, such as inviting police officers into school to talk to them. Pupils show that they are well aware of the risks and know what to do to keep themselves safe.

Inspection findings

- In order to check whether the school remains good I followed a number of lines of enquiry. I first focused on how well pupils are progressing in phonics from their different starting points. This is because the school's published data shows that although the proportion of pupils attaining the required standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check is improving, it has been below the national average for the last three years.
- Leaders are taking effective action to address the weaknesses. They have reviewed teaching approaches across the school so that phonics activities are fun and well-matched to pupils' needs. When we observed phonics teaching together we saw that pupils show a keen interest in playing with sounds and in blending them to read and write words. We also noted that that teachers and teaching assistants have consistently high expectations and use their good subject knowledge to ensure that each pupil grasps the phonic skills being taught. When I heard a group of pupils read I found that they were able to apply their phonics skills well, such as in sounding out unfamiliar words successfully. The confidence and skill demonstrated by pupils indicates that the school's chosen approach is leading to good progress over time.
- Leaders ensure that pupils' progress in phonics is checked closely and use assessment well to prepare suitable teaching for groups of pupils. This is improving pupils' outcomes. However, assessment during lessons does not consistently pick up errors and misconceptions.
- Another line of enquiry focused on how well teachers ensure that most-able pupils make good progress, especially in mathematics. This is because the

school's published data indicates that over the last three years most-able pupils in Year 6 made less progress than other pupils nationally, especially in mathematics.

- The leadership team is taking appropriate action to improve the teaching of mathematics. This is benefiting most-able pupils, who are being taught how to develop their mathematical knowledge and skills at greater depth. When we observed mathematics teaching together, we saw that a number of most-able pupils throughout the school were challenged well. For example, pupils in Year 6 demonstrated effective reasoning skills to solve problems involving conversion between different measurements and relished the challenge this brought.
- Pupils told me that they find their work challenging and interesting. As one pupil said: 'The level of my work is perfect. I feel like I am always going to learn something more, always another step.' A few, however, feel that work is still too easy. Although the most able pupils are mentioned specifically as a group in the school's plans for improving outcomes, leaders' objectives are not clear and precise enough to bring about consistent improvements in pupils' progress.
- Finally, I explored how effectively leaders are improving attendance and reducing the number of fixed-period exclusions. This is because, although attendance is just above average, it has declined over the last three years and the percentage of pupils missing school regularly has increased. Published data indicates that the rate of fixed-period exclusion was above the national average in 2017.
- You showed me evidence that fixed-period exclusion is used as a last resort. The rate of exclusion has fallen significantly since 2017 and has been used rarely this academic year. You were able to provide evidence to show that you know the needs of individual families very well. Consequently, you are able to offer effective support where it is needed. You showed that attendance is improving and that the number of pupils who are persistently absent is reducing. Even so, leaders do not have a clear enough overview of the trends in the school's attendance over the last three years, resulting in plans for further improvement being too vague.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that action plans are refined further, so that improvements are more rapid, by:

- reducing the number of objectives in order to focus on the most important priorities
- setting out objectives to be achieved at regular intervals
- using clear and precise criteria for measuring success towards achieving each objective.

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

Yours sincerely

Judith Sumner
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

We discussed the lines of enquiry for this inspection, the school's evaluation of its performance and information about current pupils' progress and attainment. I held meetings with you, some of your senior leaders, the attendance leader and some governors. I also spoke to the school's local authority improvement adviser on the telephone. I visited most year groups and looked at a sample of pupils' books in order to evaluate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. I heard some pupils in Reception and Year 1 read. I spoke informally with pupils in classrooms about their learning and met formally with a group of pupils to find out about their experiences in school. I looked at the procedures for safeguarding pupils, including how checks are made for the recruitment of staff and volunteers. I looked at behaviour and incident records, and examined a sample of safeguarding records. I held a discussion with you as the school's designated safeguarding lead. I took into account the views of 67 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, as well as the 57 responses parents made using the free-text service. I looked at the 10 responses to Ofsted's online staff survey and the 44 responses to the pupil online survey.