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Mrs Katy Brooks
Headteacher
St Stephen's Infant School
Hales Drive
Canterbury
Kent
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Dear Mrs Brooks

Short inspection of St Stephen's Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 12 January 2016 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 June 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since arriving at the school, you have put great effort and energy into making the changes that will ensure the school continues to improve. Your vision is one of excellence and you have not been afraid to challenge staff at all levels in your determination to achieve this. Because of this, the school is moving forward, a view expressed strongly by parents and supported by the local authority.

During my visit it was clear that the personal development and well-being of each and every child are of great importance to all members of staff. The school is a caring, nurturing community where pupils learn much more than how to read and write. The classrooms I visited were busy, with pupils working hard, but having fun and enjoying the challenges set for them by their teachers. I certainly got the impression that the school's motto, 'Together we shine', is a reality here.

Pupils enjoy an exciting and engaging curriculum, delivered by talented and dedicated staff. Specialists are employed to deliver lessons in physical education and sport to all year groups across the school. I witnessed these high-quality sessions for the Reception classes throughout the morning as I moved around the school, having to pass through the hall often, taking care to avoid flying beanbags and hopping children.

Your newly commissioned 'forest school', built on site with the help of parents, is not only beginning to transform the way pupils engage with the natural environment but is also having an impact on the way they approach their wider learning. This is particularly the case with boys, who benefit from the creative approach of the specialist qualified teacher responsible for this exciting development.

The progress of pupils is monitored closely. You and your senior leaders ensure that those pupils in danger of falling behind are supported well and given the extra help required for them to catch up. Disadvantaged pupils and those who are disabled or who have special educational needs are also supported well and outcomes for these pupils are improving across the school.

Pupils' behaviour is excellent. They are confident and were very pleased to explain to me what they were learning as I visited their classrooms. Their attitudes to learning are commendable. They know they come to school to learn and that they must work hard to ensure they do so. This was particularly apparent when I talked more formally to children from each year group, asking them what they thought about their school. They also made it clear to me that they feel safe in school and are very happy to be there.

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors recognised the many strengths of the school, including pupils' exemplary behaviour, excellent pastoral care, consistently good or better teaching and high expectations from staff. They also identified a need to accelerate progress and raise pupils' attainment in writing. Although outcomes in writing are still less strong than those for reading and mathematics, which are significantly better than those seen nationally, leaders have addressed this matter effectively so that:

- attainment in writing is above that seen nationally
- pupils make good progress in writing from their different starting points, including those who are more able, with the vast majority being well prepared for their move to junior school.

Since joining the school, you, senior leaders and governors have continued the important process of self-evaluation in order to identify the key priorities to improve the school. You were able to explain very clearly the strengths of the school, as well as areas that still need to be developed. While outcomes in reading and mathematics are strong, you recognise that outcomes in writing, especially for boys and disadvantaged pupils, could be better. With recent changes in the membership and leadership of the governing body, you are sensibly building on the prior strengths of governors so that they can be even more effective in holding school leaders to account.

Safeguarding is effective.

The safety of pupils is afforded the highest degree of importance and it was clear to me that every member of staff and the governing body understands their roles and responsibilities in this area. Pupils told me that they feel very safe within school. Parents also told me that they think their children are safe and cared for well. During my visit I was able to see first-hand the daily routines and procedures that ensure pupils stay safe, including their supervision during breaktimes and the way they start and finish the school day. Site security has been a concern in the past and you were able to explain the sensible and proportionate solution to the question of internal boundary fencing in order to keep pupils safe.

Staff receive regular and appropriate training about safeguarding. Governors have also received bespoke training. Policies, including those closely linked to the safeguarding of children, are up to date. Records, including the single central record, are maintained in an efficient manner.

Inspection findings

- You provide strong and determined leadership and have a clear vision for the future of the school. You are not prepared to see the school stand still and have not been afraid to challenge staff at all levels or bring about the changes required to make this an outstanding school.
- Governors are also determined to see the school improve. They recognise that they have a key role to play in securing the improvements required to make this an outstanding school and are reflective enough to know they can be better. Recent recruitment to three vacant positions will build capacity. Further bespoke training and achieving the quality standard of Governor Mark will strengthen the governing body's effectiveness.
- Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage do well. The percentage of children leaving the Reception classes and moving into Year 1 at the appropriate level of development is much higher than the national average. They benefit from an exciting learning environment with staff who cater for their needs very well.
- The school's phonics provision is strong and has improved year on year. More pupils reach the expected standard in Year 1 than the national average. This is also the case in Year 2. All disadvantaged pupils meet the expected standard in phonics by the end of Year 2.
- Outcomes in reading and mathematics are very sound. Pupils make good progress from their different starting points and collectively attain significantly higher than the national average in these subjects by the end of Year 2.
- Outcomes in writing are not as strong as those for reading and mathematics, although pupils' attainment has been better than national averages for the last five years. Outcomes for boys and disadvantaged pupils are weaker in writing and this remains a focus for improvement.

- The wider curriculum is broad and balanced. Talented staff, including support staff, ensure that the learning environment is engaging and exciting. Music and the arts are a key part of everyday life in the school. Physical education and sports provision is of high quality. The newly introduced 'forest school' sessions have stirred the interests of all pupils, especially those who have struggled with motivation in the past.
- Provision for disadvantaged pupils has improved due to planned interventions and targeted support. Because of this, more of them are making better progress. The gaps between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils within the school and nationally are closing rapidly in the Early Years Foundation Stage and in Year 1 and Year 2 phonics outcomes. Gaps are closing, but not rapidly enough in writing by the end of Year 2. This is a priority for improvement.
- Most pupils attend school regularly. The school is very aware of those pupils who need support to enable them to attend school on time and regularly. Support staff, responsible for monitoring and intervening when pupils don't attend school, communicate well and are dedicated in their work.
- The quality of teaching in the school is very good. Teachers have high expectations and pupils are challenged to work hard in order to achieve their best.
- Pupils are proud of their work and proud of their school. Their attitudes to learning are very well developed and I was impressed with their confidence and willingness to tell me about the things they like or dislike about coming to school. My visits to classrooms revealed a happy and harmonious partnership between pupils and adults, where the aim is for every child to succeed.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- pupils' achievement and outcomes in writing, especially those for boys and disadvantaged pupils, improve to match those for reading and mathematics
- the governing body fully develops its capacity to become as effective as possible, in order to both support and challenge leaders to make this an outstanding school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Kent County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Clive Close

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, other leaders, teachers, pupils, the Chair of the Governing Body and four other governors. I also spoke to a representative of the local authority on the telephone. Throughout the day, I visited every classroom, including the outdoor forest school classroom. For most of my visits to classrooms, I was accompanied by you or the acting deputy headteacher. I observed pupils' behaviour in and around the school, including at lunchtime. I also attended an assembly. I spoke to a number of parents at the beginning of the day. I took into account the 72 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and the 25 freetext responses submitted by parents. I took account of two letters sent to me by parents. I took account of the 27 responses to the staff survey and seven letters submitted by staff. I also took into account a letter submitted by a former Chair of the Governing Body. I analysed a wide range of school documentation, including information about pupils' achievement, your own self-evaluation, the school improvement plan, minutes of governors' meetings, records of visits by the local authority, safeguarding checks, policies and procedures.