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Ms Melanie Smith
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Smith

Short inspection of Sarden Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 5 December 2017, 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 March 2013.

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 team are determined that pupils at Sarden will demonstrate the school vision of enjoying, learning and achieving together. You encourage members of the community to contribute to the life of the school, from the proactive parent body, to the volunteers who help in classrooms and clubs. Everyone works together to ensure that pupils have the best provision possible. This provision then extends back into the community by, for example, the gardening club delivering pots of flowers to the local chapel. In this way, you have ensured that the school is an integral part of the village it serves, and is at the heart of its community.

This is a school where pupils thrive and develop as confident, articulate learners. Pupils talk excitedly about the range of activities on offer, the support their teachers give them and the kindness of their fellow pupils. They enjoy using the extensive school grounds and new play equipment. Parents value highly the happy, family atmosphere of the school. All parents who spoke to me, or completed Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, felt that their children were happy and well cared for, with 100% happy to recommend the school. You have helped forge a strong community spirit, and families appreciate the warmth of this small village school. Comments such as, 'My child is always happy to get to school and comes home excited about her day,' were typical of those received. Parents particularly value the effective communication systems which mean concerns can be addressed swiftly.

The general view can be summed up by the parent who said: 'Great school. Happy kids. My child is thriving.'

Governors are highly effective. The trust and the local governing body have a clear understanding of their different, but complementary, strategic roles. Together, their regular review, challenge and support contribute effectively to the monitoring of the school's effectiveness. Your leadership team is involved in regular meetings to check on the progress that pupils are making. As a result, most pupils achieve well, and the quality of teaching and learning is good and improving. However, teachers' expectations of pupils are sometimes not high enough, particularly for the most able.

You have maintained and built upon the strengths identified at the last inspection, and have addressed the areas for improvement effectively, despite extensive staffing and leadership changes. Pupils at the ends of key stages 1 and 2 have consistently attained above national averages in assessments, in English and mathematics, over the past two years. Children in the early years consistently attain above-average results. In 2016, and in provisional results for 2017, all groups of pupils at the end of key stage 2 made strong progress from their starting points. You are not complacent, however. You know that teaching in some year groups does not demonstrate the consistently high standards you aspire to. You have also recently revised the curriculum. This was a careful process, which included listening to pupil views, to ensure that the bespoke new curriculum reflected both the needs and the interests of your community. You acknowledge that further revision may be needed to ensure that pupils develop the range of specific skills that are needed in each subject, to be well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Safeguarding is effective.

All staff keep a watchful oversight on all pupils. Because you know your pupils so well, any changes that might suggest a concern about a pupil's well-being or safety are quickly noticed and explored. Good relationships and a personalised approach ensure that pupils' needs are known, and families who require a little help, from time to time, get the necessary support. Pupils told me that they feel safe and supported at school. They have a good knowledge of how to keep themselves safe, including online. Along with governors, you have made regular school attendance a priority for all. For the few remaining individuals for whom this remains a challenge, appropriate support systems are in place.

The school's safeguarding policy is kept under regular review and adheres to the latest government guidance. All appropriate checks are completed on appointment of staff. Staff receive regular training and are aware of what to do if they have concerns about a pupil.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, we looked closely at specific aspects of the school's provision, including: the effectiveness of safeguarding, achievement across the

school, the provision for the most able pupils in key stage 1 and the effectiveness of the wider curriculum in preparing pupils for the next stages of their education and life in modern Britain.

- In both 2016 and 2017, attainment in national assessments in early years, in phonics in Year 1, key stage 1 at expected standards and key stage 2 at expected and higher standards were at least in line with and often above national percentages. For the last two years, the results of most national assessments have been in line with, and often above, results nationally. The exception is in the proportions of pupils reaching higher standards at the end of key stage 1. These figures have sometimes been below national results. Because of this, we looked together at achievement in different year groups of the school to check for consistency. We found that work in pupils' books is variable because expectations are not always high enough, particularly for the most able. Leaders' records show that establishing consistently high expectations is, rightly, an area of focus for school development.
- Following a period of staff changes, much work has been done to raise teachers' expectations of both quality and quantity of pupils' work. In places, such as upper key stage 2, these expectations are high. In other year groups, expectations are inconsistent, particularly for the most able pupils. This strength is being used as a model to support staff effectively through the sharing of good practice. Teachers have regular meetings to discuss pupils' progress with leaders. Leaders give them appropriate targets to support their professional development. As a result, standards across the school are rising.
- Over the past two years, at key stage 1 the numbers of pupils attaining the higher levels at the end of key stage assessments have sometimes been below the percentages seen nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. We therefore looked closely together at the current progress and attainment of the most able pupils. School information indicates that their progress from starting points has been good. Pupils' books showed progress from their starting points. Work in pupils' mathematics books contained regular challenge activities, which pupils told me that they enjoy. However, writing activities did not always contain sufficient challenge to extend pupils.
- The new curriculum engages pupils, who particularly enjoy art, science and music. They relish the exciting opportunities presented by making wind socks, for example, or trying out the ukulele. Pupils' artwork in books and around the walls is detailed and careful. Staff say that the curriculum now provides increased opportunity for connecting learning, and that this aids deeper understanding. This connectivity was evident in topic books. Subject leaders are monitoring their subjects effectively through looking at books and sharing plans. This is helping to ensure that curriculum coverage is sufficient. However, while subjects such as science and history cover the required content, subject skills are not yet as evident. There is a lack of higher order scientific and historical skills, for example skills such as understanding of source materials and the complexity of historical perspective, and in scientific measurement, evidence and prediction.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers have consistently high expectations, especially of the most able pupils, so that challenge across the curriculum is systematic in all year groups
- the systematic development of the specific skills needed in different subjects is evident across the curriculum.

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

Yours sincerely

Deborah Gordon
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, your leadership team, members of the local governing body, other staff, and a representative from the trust. I reviewed documentation, including information about pupils' achievement, the school improvement plan, and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures. I observed pupils around the school and in their classes. Together, we visited all classes. In the classes, I observed teaching, looked at books, and spoke to pupils about their work. I met with six pupils to get their views of the school and to hear them read. I took account of parents' views in the playground in the morning, and considered 24 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 23 free-text comments. I considered six responses to the staff survey.