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Mr Sean Millar
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Dear Mr Millar

Short inspection of The Topsham School

Following my visit to the school on 21 March 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 February 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. This is because you have successfully strengthened leadership capacity at senior and middle levels recently. You trust other members of staff to lead aspects of the school's work. This, in turn, heightens the important contribution they make to improving pupils' outcomes. Together, you articulate a clear vision of high expectations for all involved with the school. The Topsham School is a nurturing school that empowers pupils to achieve. Parents say that the school has improved substantially since your appointment and typically describe it as 'a happy and safe school with fabulous, hard-working staff and a strong sense of community'.

Leaders know the school and its pupils well. You are aware of the areas for improvement, such as improving all pupils' writing and mathematics skills and increasing the number of pupils who achieve at a higher standard. You and your leadership team have set about tackling them swiftly and with vigour. You understand that improvements such as these are necessary to enable all groups of pupils to make strong progress. Governors are also aware of what needs to improve in the school. You value the necessary degree of challenge and support they provide, which ensures that leaders stay focused on the key issues.

You model your high aspirations in words and deeds. Governors, parents and staff hold you in high regard because of this. You have developed a staff team that shares your drive to enable all pupils to achieve the highest levels possible. The

high quality of work on display around the school signifies your high expectations and celebrates pupils' considerable achievements. Pupils have attained well over time but governors drive leaders to aim for even greater heights. One governor said, 'We demand a lot from the headteacher and his staff; we are not going to put up with anything less than excellent.' Governors bring a range of expertise and experience to the governing body, which has strengthened their capacity to hold leaders to account.

Pupils engage well in their learning because they find the work stimulating and interesting. As a result, their behaviour is good. They follow instructions, pay close attention to their teacher and work well with each other. Pupils are encouraged to be resilient workers and support each other in their learning. One pupil who spoke to me said, 'When you get stuck you have a go and keep trying. You might ask a partner or go to the learning wall. That helps.'

You have successfully addressed areas raised in the previous inspection. You have improved day-to-day communication with parents and regularly engage them, through the website and in person, in their child's learning. You were also asked to increase pupils' understanding of how to improve their work. Your action plan clearly demonstrates a relentless focus on improving pupils' outcomes. Pupils' books show that most are making good progress in English and mathematics. However, you readily accept that there is more to do, particularly where the achievement of the most able pupils is concerned.

At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed on the key lines of enquiry to be considered during the day. These included establishing the effectiveness of actions taken to raise all groups of pupils' achievement across the school, with particular emphasis on pupils' progress in key stage 1. We also agreed to consider pupils' engagement in a relevant and exciting curriculum that met their needs, and whether safeguarding is effective. These lines of enquiry are considered below under 'Safeguarding' and 'Inspection findings'.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and the wider staff take their responsibilities for safeguarding seriously. The policies and procedures that inform day-to-day practice are robust and meet all statutory requirements, including the recruitment of staff and volunteers. As a result of receiving the appropriate training, staff are clear about what they should do if they have concerns about pupils. You have also made sure that all staff understand the government's 'Prevent' duty, intended to counter the risks of radicalisation. Your approach is both reasonable and proportionate, and takes careful account of the context of the school. Securely kept referrals and logs are comprehensively detailed and ordered, enabling staff to follow up concerns in a timely and effective way. The governors also have oversight of safeguarding, which further strengthens their monitoring.

This is a caring school, where pupils are known as individuals. The positive culture of keeping all pupils safe is illustrated by pupils' ability to know whom to ask for

help. They say that 'any grown-up' or 'the person closest to you' will help keep you safe in the playground. Pupils are helped to understand e-safety and cyber bullying. As in other aspects of school life, you have placed a great deal of importance on the benefits of partnerships to ensure pupils' safety, welfare and well-being.

Inspection findings

- Pupils achieve well over time in the phonics check in Year 1, which has been above the national figure for the last three years. The number of children in the early years foundation stage who have achieved a good level of development has also been consistently above average over time.
- While the most able pupils in mathematics are set more taxing problems than other members of the class, these tasks are not always specific enough to meet the needs of individual pupils. The level of challenge is not always consistent from day to day.
- Leaders have identified that the most able pupils are not making the progress in writing of which they are capable. Leaders are taking action to address this through redeploying teaching assistants and monitoring the quality of teaching and assessment. Pupils are being provided with more opportunities to write at length, and for different purposes and audiences. Furthermore, pupils' writing is celebrated in learning displays to model good practice and show others how much fun writing can be.
- Outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics for Year 6 pupils who had special educational needs and/or disabilities and left the school in 2016 were lower than expected nationally. Leaders have taken swift action to ensure that current pupils are given targeted support to achieve more highly in all three subjects. Pupils' progress is being very carefully tracked to identify and remedy weaknesses.
- Attendance overall and for all groups of pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils, is improving. Overall attendance is currently above average. The school has worked with parents to help them understand the importance of good attendance. If pupils are absent for the morning session, parents are called to see if their child is well enough to attend after lunch. This exemplifies the persistence of staff in trying to secure good attendance. As a result, attendance is improving and pupils' attitudes to staying at home are changing.
- The curriculum is lively and exciting. It provides pupils with opportunities to acquire knowledge across the full range of subjects, such as design and technology, science and history. You have worked hard to broaden creative opportunities for pupils and make learning fun. For example, during the inspection, some classes were taking part in a regular drama workshop taken by a visiting specialist. Pupils said that they valued visits out of school which physically challenged and excited them, such as a visit to a local climbing wall. Parents agreed with this. One parent said, 'The school focuses on academic progress and attainment while still giving the children a wide range of opportunities.'
- Nearly all parents who responded to the Parent View online survey would recommend the school. They say that engagement with the school has

considerably improved since your appointment. One parent said, 'The headteacher has made a strong impression dramatically improving communication with parents, demonstrating a clear presence at the front of the school each morning, actively welcoming feedback, listening carefully and generally proving to be a very able leader.'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- tailor learning more specifically to the needs of individual pupils, particularly the most able and those who are not yet making the progress they are capable of, so that they achieve more highly in writing and mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

Julie Jane
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I met with you and with the leader responsible for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. I also met with representatives of the governing body and with pupils.

Together, we visited the foundation stage and observed pupils' attitudes to learning in all classes, including literacy and mathematics lessons. The work in pupils' books was scrutinised in detail.

A range of documentary evidence was considered, which included the school's self-evaluation, the school improvement plan, current progress information and attendance information. I also scrutinised safeguarding records and the bullying log and considered staff employment files. We discussed a wide range of matters relating to pupils' safety and welfare, including staff vetting and recruitment procedures.

In addition, I took account of 89 responses to the Parent View online survey, 83 responses to the pupil survey and 20 responses to the staff survey issued during the inspection.