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Dear Mrs Jones

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 31 January 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. Since your appointment in 2014, and following on from a period of instability in leadership, you have provided clarity of vision and a shared determination that 'every child deserves the best'. You are well supported by your governors and other leaders. Staff have a clear understanding of the school's aims and there is a growing sense of togetherness. Staff told me that they feel supported and empowered to carry out their roles. As a consequence, St Mary's is an improving school that provides a harmonious and well-organised environment in which pupils develop increasing confidence in their learning and play.

You are rightly proud that pupils willingly embrace 'The St Mary's Way' (Respect ourselves, Respect others, Respect our school, Love God). As a result, pupils are typically well behaved, polite and respectful. One pupil told me that 'we value our beliefs' and inspection evidence supports this view. Pupils speak with confidence and pride about their school and the adults who work in it. Pupils also welcome the opportunities to develop their leadership skills. They spoke enthusiastically about their role as 'Yellow Caps' (lunchtime helpers) and about being part of the school council. One pupil explained that 'school helps us become more responsible' and their peers agreed.

Pupils are keen to learn and demonstrate increasing resilience in their learning. They understand the importance of working hard to achieve their goals.

Pupils take care over the presentation of their work and respond well to the feedback that teachers provide for them. This is preparing pupils well for the next stages of their education. As one pupil commented, 'School is teaching me that you have to work hard to show why you are the right person for the job.' Pupils are also developing a broad understanding of life in Britain. For example, they have a good knowledge of different faiths and maturely explained why it is important for them to learn about them.

On your appointment in 2014, you judged that standards were not high enough. You took effective action and rightly continue to challenge practice where it is not of the high standard you expect. You have raised teachers' expectations of what pupils can and should achieve. The impact of your actions can be seen in improving outcomes in the early years and, in particular, at key stage 2, where pupils' achievement in reading and mathematics is significantly higher than that of their peers nationally. However, you recognise that staffing changes that have taken place over the past few years have been a cause of frustration to a small number of parents. This staffing situation is easing. You have plans in place to engage with parents even more effectively.

Children at St Mary's begin their education well. This is because provision in the Nursery is strong and prepares children well for their move into the improving early years setting. Here, children make good progress from their individual starting points. Children are provided with a broad range of activities so they develop their social skills as well as communication, English and mathematical skills. The proportion of children achieving a good level of development has risen significantly since 2014 and is now above the national average.

At the time of the previous inspection, leaders were asked to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. This remains a focus of your work. Teachers value the training and support provided by you and your leaders, and they have opportunities to visit colleagues in their own and in other schools. As a consequence of this training, and better use of assessment information, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment continues to improve. However, you are accurate in your view that teaching in key stage 1 lacks the consistency found elsewhere in the school. While you are taking effective action to improve provision in key stage 1, pupil outcomes at key stage 1 are not yet as strong as those at key stage 2.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your governors have been successful in making St Mary's Catholic Primary School a safe place in which to learn. Pupils informed me that they value the work of teachers and other adults in keeping them safe and secure. The vast majority of parents who responded to the online questionnaire, Parent View, agreed that their children are safe and happy at school.

Pupils understand why it is important to be aware of potential risks. They told me that the school makes sure they know how to keep safe when using the internet, or when travelling to and from school.

Pupils have a clear understanding of bullying and its consequences. They also explained that while bullying occurs 'once in a while', it is taken very seriously by you and your staff and issues are sorted out quickly. Staff and the large majority of parents agree that this is the case.

Adults, including governors, are appropriately trained in, and alert to, their safeguarding responsibilities, including those relating to the government's 'Prevent' duty. As a consequence, they know what to do if they have concerns about a child's well-being. Leaders also keep careful records of actions taken when children need additional care and support.

The governing body is effective in ensuring that the school meets its statutory requirement to keep children safe. An experienced and knowledgeable governor regularly scrutinises the school's record of checks carried out on adults working in the school. To assure themselves of pupils' well-being, governors also undertake visits to school, during which they gather pupils' views.

Inspection findings

- I explored how well leaders and teachers support most-able pupils to achieve their best. This was because in 2016, these pupils did not make the same high levels of progress as others in English and mathematics. You and your leaders have already taken action to ensure that most-able pupils receive greater levels of support and challenge. For example, through your chosen system of 'red, yellow and green challenges', pupils are able to access progressively more demanding tasks and relish doing so.
- Due to the effective work of your middle leaders, many pupils have the opportunity to grapple with more complex mathematical problems and ambitious writing tasks. However, in some classes, in particular in key stage 1, teachers still do not provide most-able pupils with demanding enough work that challenges them fully. Most-able pupils commented that they would like greater support and guidance to enable them to excel. You have correctly identified improving the most able pupils' achievement as a priority for the school.
- I also examined how well pupils in need of additional support are catching up or making stronger progress. In 2016, these pupils did not achieve as well as they could have, in key stage 1 in particular. The evidence seen in pupils' work in their books demonstrates that many are making improved progress across a range of subjects, including English and mathematics. Teachers and teaching assistants are more skilled in providing the correct and appropriate level of support for those pupils who need it. Pupils are also increasingly well supported through activities such as your 'booster classes' and small-group learning sessions.
- I also considered what leaders are doing to improve pupils' achievement in writing. In 2016, at key stage 2, while pupils made significantly better progress than their peers nationally in reading and mathematics, this was not the case in writing. You are taking effective action to improve the range and quality of pupils' writing throughout the school. For example, in the early years, children are supported to develop their pencil grip through your 'funky fingers' activities.

- In key stages 1 and 2, pupils are provided with many more opportunities to write at length, creatively and in a variety of literary styles. Your accurate assessment information and evidence from pupils' work indicates that many pupils, including those who are disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, are now making strong progress in writing from their individual starting points. Pupils also read with confidence and explained to me how much they enjoy their work on literacy; both reading and writing.
- To determine if the school continues to provide good-quality education, I sought to establish how well pupils of all ages achieve across the curriculum. Inspection evidence indicates that many pupils make good progress across a range of subjects, including science, religious education, art and history. This is because teachers typically have the same high expectations of what pupils can achieve in these subjects as they do in English and mathematics. You acknowledge that leaders do not track the progress that pupils make across some subjects with the same precision and regularity as is the case in English, mathematics and science.
- Overall, pupil attendance has been a strength of the school for some time. However, in 2016, the attendance of pupils who had special educational needs and/or disabilities was lower than others in school and nationally. Some of these pupils were absent for considerable periods of time, as were some pupils who were eligible for free school meals. The attendance of these groups of pupils was a key line of enquiry for this inspection. This year, overall pupil attendance remains high. Inspection evidence demonstrates that you are rigorous and tireless in your efforts to improve the attendance of the small number of pupils who do not attend school as often as they should do. However, these pupils' attendance remains lower than it should be.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- where the quality of teaching, learning and assessment remains inconsistent, teachers plan learning that is appropriately challenging for pupils, especially the most able pupils and particularly in key stage 1
- work to improve the attendance of the small number of pupils who are too frequently absent from school continues
- middle leaders track the progress that pupils make in other subjects with the same precision with which they review pupils' progress in English, mathematics and science
- they increase the effectiveness with which they engage with parents about the good work and changes taking place in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

John Lucas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Over the course of the inspection, I met with you, your senior leaders, the leaders of English and mathematics, and two governors to discuss the progress of the school since the previous inspection. I also held two phone conversations with a representative of the local authority.

With you, I observed learning in the Nursery, the early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2. I also sampled pupils' current work in books and folders.

I met with a group of 10 pupils and spoke informally with a number of pupils in lessons and around the school site.

Documents, including those relating to safeguarding, achievement, attendance and governor meetings, were examined.

The views of 35 parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were taken into account, as well as the responses of a small number of parents provided using the free-text service. I also took into consideration the views of parents who spoke with me on the day of the inspection.

I took account of the views of 26 members of staff who completed the staff questionnaire.