

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 1231231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566 937
Direct F 01695 729320
Direct email:
jsimmons@cfbt.com



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Mrs Valerie McNamara
Headteacher
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Preston
Rigby Street
Preston
Lancashire
PR1 5XL

Dear Mrs McNamara

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Preston

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 17 November 2011 and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please pass my thanks on to the pupils, members of the governing body and local authority representative who gave up their time to talk to me about the school.

As a result of the inspection in May 2010, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

The 2011 national test results for Key Stage 2 were low in both English and mathematics, compared with national averages. This represents a further fall in an already declining trend. However, the data reflect significant changes to the school's population including a marked increase over several years in the proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The 2011 results reflect not only the much lower attainment of a significant proportion of the cohort with such additional needs, but also the high number of pupils who joined the school late in Key Stage 2. The headline results mask the average attainment of pupils who began Year 3 at this level and remained at the school throughout Key Stage 2. With support from the local authority, the school has been developing teachers' practice in mathematics; this is bearing fruit. Pupils' progress in mathematics improved and was in line with the national average; it was weaker in English. There was some improvement in attainment at the end of Key Stage 1. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected level for their age was broadly average, with stronger performance in mathematics than in reading and writing.

The school has adopted a robust approach to raising attendance and this is paying dividends. Attendance is rising and the number of persistent absentees is falling. Pupils are

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aware of the need for good attendance and are motivated by class and individual awards. Families receive frequent reminders about the importance of good attendance through newsletters, meetings, letters and, when necessary, the governing body's attendance panels. The school is tackling punctuality issues robustly.

Following the previous inspection, senior leaders wasted no time in starting development work on a new, thematic curriculum which is now in place. Pupils are enthusiastic about working on topics with exciting names, such as 'Abracadabra', through which learning across a range of subjects is very carefully integrated. An increased range of visits and visitors, as well as more practical activities, enliven learning and promote pupils' independence. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about, for instance, a visit from the 'mad scientist' and the opportunities they have had to conduct experiments.

The new curricular approach and design are contributing effectively to the gradual improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. In the better lessons seen during this inspection, pupils learned well through practical tasks which fostered their independence. For instance, Year 6 enjoyed thinking about the scales used for measuring liquids as they made their own fruit juice cocktails. Good links were made with themes when teaching literacy and numeracy skills so that pupils had a consistent context for their learning. Work was appropriately matched to pupils' abilities and attainment, and teachers built well on pupils' misconceptions to enhance their understanding. Where learning was less successful, planning was confused and instructions lacked clarity. Lessons moved at a slower pace because the small, sequential steps in learning were not planned for well enough, so pupils needed more support from adults. Learning was not drawn together crisply at the end of sessions.

Senior leaders demonstrate a strong determination to make the improvements required and have sought support from the local authority and beyond to assist them in this. Appropriate actions are planned to move the school forward, although deadlines and targets by which the school can evaluate its progress, are not frequent enough or sufficiently quantifiable. Suitable systems are in place for monitoring the quality of provision and pupils' progress so leaders have a realistic view of the school's progress. As a consequence of the new curriculum design, the roles of middle leaders have been reviewed. Following training, a new system for monitoring the impact of curriculum areas on pupils' learning is being rolled out, helpfully extending the responsibilities of middle leaders. The governing body is supportive; room for greater levels of challenge remains.

The local authority has provided considerable, valued support to the school, the positive impact of which is evident, for instance, in improvements in pupils' progress in mathematics. A new, carefully planned phase of support is about to get underway.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely,

Jane Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in May 2010

- Raise pupils' achievement and accelerate their progress by:
 - raising the expectations of staff of what pupils can achieve independently
 - developing a curriculum that reflects pupils' interests and inspires them to apply their skills of reading, writing and information and communication technology to all subjects
 - working with families and pupils to reduce absence.

- Strengthen the impact of leadership and management by:
 - developing clear strategies for managing change in order to accelerate the implementation of necessary change
 - improving the quality of improvement planning and accompanying systems to monitor the progress towards achieving the school's targets
 - developing the role of the governing body in monitoring the school's performance.