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25 November 2015

Mr Daniel Theobalds  
St James' Church of England Primary School  
Off Stopes Brow  
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Darwen  
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Dear Mr Theobalds

### **Short inspection of St James' Church of England Primary School**

Following my visit to the school on 17 November 2015, 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 November 2011.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You, the staff and the governors have a clear vision and a passion to provide the best possible education for pupils. You place pupils' achievement at the centre of your plans and your high expectations are shared by the staff. As a result, pupils achieve standards above the national averages in writing and mathematics and well above the national average in reading.

All groups of pupils make good progress from their starting points because you have ensured that teaching has improved to be consistently good. Where you identify the first signs of underperformance you are not afraid to take immediate and decisive action; consequently these issues are quickly and successfully tackled.

Leaders, governors, staff and pupils have great pride in the school and its links with the community. Governors describe the connections between the church, school and community as 'seamless'.

The governing body has ensured that staffing changes since the last inspection have not created instability or lessened its unremitting focus on pupils' learning. Since your recent appointment as substantive headteacher, following a short period as acting headteacher, you have demonstrated drive and determination to take the school on the next stage of its journey. Furthermore, you are providing well-considered support and opportunities for other staff to hone their leadership skills.

At the last inspection, inspectors commended the school's robust self-evaluation processes that provided leaders and governors with accurate knowledge of the improvements needed. You have maintained this rigour. You carefully analysed the recent disappointing results in the proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the time they leave the early years and pinpointed the cause of their weaker performance in writing. You took immediate and effective action that has halted and begun quickly to reverse this decline.

You and the governing body have high aspirations for St James' and continue to strive to achieve the highest quality in all aspects of the school's work. Your review and self-evaluation of the school has enabled you to identify core priorities in the school's development plan. These areas include ensuring that subject and other middle leaders, some of whom are new to the role, play a greater part in school improvement. You also are committed to enhancing the quality of teaching so that more is of outstanding quality. Your ultimate aim is that more pupils, especially boys, make even better progress in writing and mathematics to match that seen in reading.

Inspectors also identified the following areas for improvement in the previous inspection: the challenge that pupils, especially the most able, receive in lessons; the expectation that teachers have of pupils; developing the guidance that pupils receive through teachers' marking of work; improving the opportunities for pupils to undertake independent learning; and teachers' use of targets to help pupils achieve.

The school has successfully tackled all of these improvement priorities. Teachers have high expectations of pupils from all groups and set challenging and engaging tasks for them in lessons. Teachers' use of individual targets and feedback, including marking, continues to improve because of additional training they have received. Feedback and marking helps pupils learn, particularly in English and mathematics, and consequently, pupils' progress remains faster than that seen nationally. Pupils' attainment has improved, particularly in reading because it has been a priority for improvement. As a result, standards in reading at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2015 were well above national averages.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

At the school's previous inspection, inspectors identified safeguarding as a strength of the school because of its 'exceptionally robust processes that enable staff to care for pupils effectively'. You have maintained and enhanced these processes to ensure that high standards of safeguarding are in place.

The school has reviewed its safeguarding policy and amended it to take into account all current guidance and requirements. The policy is now reflective of the high standards of safeguarding practised throughout the school. Leaders continue to ensure that staff are appropriately trained and that arrangements are in place to help protect pupils from any dangers arising from radicalisation and extremism. Appropriate checks are made prior to the appointment of new members of staff. Disabled pupils and those with medical needs are well cared for while appropriate

plans are in place to deal with any medical emergency. Pupils feel safe and are happy to come to school because of the effective systems and procedures that are in place to keep them safe.

## **Inspection findings**

- Leaders have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school because of their rigorous self-evaluation. Their analysis of school assessment information is forensic and allows leaders to identify clearly where pupils are making the best progress and where further work is needed. For example, this analysis allowed leaders to identify quickly the reasons for the drop in the proportion of children achieving a good level of development at the end of early years in 2015. From this they implemented sharply focused actions that are tackling this issue for children who are currently in the Reception year and those now in Year 1.
- Leaders have recognised that pupils' attendance at school is not as high as they would wish. Many of the pupils who are persistently absent from school are absent through well-founded medical and exceptional family reasons. Leaders monitor attendance frequently and liaise with educational welfare officers monthly to implement actions that offer support and robustly challenge any absence concerns. As a result of these actions, attendance has continued to rise year on year and is now closer to national averages.
- Governors, many of whom are long-standing members of the governing body, are passionately committed to the school. They have a wide variety of skills and backgrounds which they use well to evaluate carefully the information they receive and to ask probing questions. Governors frequently visit the school to talk with staff and pupils. They use these visits to check the accuracy of the information they receive.
- The governing body is self-evaluative and recognises that there are things it could do better. As a consequence of its most recent self-evaluation, it is undertaking a restructure of its committees to enable them to be more sharply focused and agile in responding to the school's needs. Governors also recognise that they need to ensure that the information they publish on the school's website is up to date, so that the best information is available to parents.
- Pupils enjoy learning because teaching has continued to improve and is now consistently good. Teachers set tasks that are well matched to pupils' abilities and offer challenge to all pupils, including the most able. In mathematics, investigations are used effectively to present open challenges to pupils, for example in finding different equivalent fractions or identifying mathematical patterns in number sequences.
- Teachers have strong subject knowledge and use this well in lessons to make subjects interesting. In geography, pupils in Year 6 have learned about different types of volcanoes. Their work shows that they are confident in using technical vocabulary such as 'dome mountains' and 'strata volcanoes'. Teachers use questioning well to encourage pupils to

explain their thinking and give reasons for answers, such as explaining why some shapes are placed in particular areas of Carroll diagrams. However, on occasions teachers can be too quick to answer their well-formed questions themselves and do not always give pupils enough time to formulate answers before moving the lesson on.

- Teachers use investigations and practical experiences well to ensure that pupils apply their knowledge and skills to learn for themselves. For example, in physical education children in the early years extend their confidence, stamina and coordination by developing for themselves sequences of movements on large equipment. As a consequence, pupils are confident to talk about what they are learning and explain the thoughts and reasons for their answers.
- Pupils are making more rapid progress in both mathematics and writing because skills in these subjects are taught systematically. As a result, pupils reached standards in 2015 that were higher than the national averages in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils say they enjoy writing, which is a priority for the school, because teachers make it fun. Pupils demonstrate a wide vocabulary and a love of reading because they are given many opportunities to enjoy books, including reading with adults at breakfast and lunchtime clubs. Work in pupils' books show that they make strong progress in both writing and mathematics.
- Phonics (letters and the sounds they make) is taught well and this has resulted in a rising trend in the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics check. This reached the national average in 2015. However, disadvantaged pupils performed less well in this check. Leaders are aware of this and have taken decisive actions to narrow the gap. These include the provision of extra experienced staff, additional staff training and the grouping of children according to their understanding. The positive impact of these actions means that, by the end of Year 2, most children have caught up.
- Children in the early years enjoy school greatly. They are excited by the learning opportunities presented to them by teachers and skilled teaching assistants. Children were keen to share their experiences of the day's shape hunt, an exciting and effective mathematics-based activity that was the result of a visit from a 'naughty elf' who had stolen the children's shapes.
- Early years leaders have a good understanding of how well children are doing because they track and carefully record children's learning and progress in detailed learning journals that are shared with parents and carers. Leaders have rightly prioritised the development of writing by ensuring that children have opportunities to use pens, pencils and other media in all areas of learning in the early years. Children are kept safe by vigilant staff who share any concerns with parents at well-organised handover times at the end of the day.
- Pupils are articulate, polite and well mannered. Their conduct around school is exemplary. Pupils display good attitudes to their learning, they listen intently and get on with work with little or no fuss. Pupils say that

there is little bullying in school and any that occurs is swiftly dealt with by teachers. Pupils' behaviour reflects the school's faith-based ethos and demonstrates the fundamental British values of respect for rules and tolerance of others.

- Parents are unequivocally supportive of the school. All parents who responded to the online questionnaire would recommend the school to others because they believe it is well led and that pupils are safe and well behaved.
- The local authority's support for the school is adequate. It has arranged some relevant support for the headteacher because he is new to the role. However, the local authority has been slow to react to the emerging issue in the early years.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- subject and other middle leaders, particularly those new in role, are supported in playing a greater part in school improvement
- the quality of teaching continues to improve so that even more pupils, particularly boys, make better than expected progress in writing and mathematics
- the actions put into place to develop writing skills in early years are consistently applied so that more pupils reach a good level of development by the time they enter Key Stage 1
- the information published on the school's website is kept up to date and reflective of the good practice in school.

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

Yours sincerely

John Nixon  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection I met with you, teaching staff, the Chair of the Governing Body and four other governors. I also met with your school improvement partner and the two advisers from the local authority who are linked with the school. I spoke with pupils during lessons and around the school. I took account of 42 responses to Parent View, the online questionnaire for parents. I also considered the responses made by pupils and staff to Ofsted's questionnaires. You and I visited classrooms to observe pupils' learning and look at their work. I reviewed information about pupils'

attainment and progress, and looked at the school's self-evaluation documents and action plans. I conducted a full review of the school's safeguarding procedures, including the school's policies, risk assessments, training, safeguarding checks and record keeping.