

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs Angela Boyle
Executive Headteacher
St Thomas More Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary
Thorndale Road
Belmont
Durham
DH1 2AQ

Dear Mrs Boyle

Short inspection of St Thomas More Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary

Following my visit to the school on 2 February 2016, 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 October 2010.

This school continues to be good.

You and your leadership team have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. There have been significant changes in leadership and staffing in recent years. This school has recently federated with St Joseph's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Gilesgate, where you are also the executive headteacher. Since your recent appointment to St Thomas More, you have worked with commitment and determination to raise expectations of what pupils can achieve. You are ably supported by the deputy headteacher who has assisted you in improving the quality of teaching to ensure that pupils make at least good progress. As a result, outcomes for pupils have improved.

From starting points which are broadly typical for children of their age, pupils make good progress. A high proportion of children in the early years reach the level of development expected for their age. In 2015, all pupils achieved the expected level in the Year 1 phonics check (letters and the sounds they represent) and results have been above those seen nationally over time. Attainment at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 rose to significantly above average in 2015. Cohorts of pupils are small and there are very few disadvantaged pupils or those who have special educational needs. These pupils receive the targeted support they need to enable them to reach their potential. It is evident from the school's own self-evaluation and from looking at pupils' work that there remain some areas to be improved. These include pupils' grasp of grammar, punctuation and spelling, the quality of their handwriting and the presentation of their work in a range of subjects.

You, leaders and governors have successfully addressed the areas for improvement from the last inspection. Evidence in pupils' books shows that the quality of marking and feedback is more effective and now has a greater impact on helping pupils to improve the content and quality of their work. This was confirmed by pupils I spoke to, who said that they find marking and self-assessment helps them to improve their work.

There have also been improvements to leadership. Subject and other leaders are new to their roles, but they have rapidly taken steps to help improve the quality of teaching and outcomes for pupils. Leaders work effectively as a team and morale among staff is high. Leaders carry out regular checks to ensure that the quality of teaching and pupils' work continue to improve. They benefit from working closely with leaders from the federated school in order to share good practice.

Governance is strong. The governing body has been reconstituted and governors share their expertise and work very effectively across both schools in the federation. Governors are very knowledgeable about the strengths and areas to be improved and they hold leaders to account robustly. The school's self-evaluation is accurate. You and the governors are ambitious for the school to become outstanding and have a clear vision for the future.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and the governing body take an uncompromising stance to ensure that pupils are kept safe. You have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records of any concerns are detailed and of high quality. Staff are vigilant in reporting any concerns and these are followed up robustly. You regularly review safeguarding policies and procedures and pay due regard to recent legislation and local authority guidance. All staff, including designated safeguarding officers, have received recent training in protecting children that is commensurate with their roles. Leaders and staff conduct regular risk assessments, including those for school trips and visits, to ensure that pupils are kept safe. You send regular newsletters to parents informing them of how to keep their children safe when using the internet. Pupils have a good awareness of what they should do if they have any concerns and are confident that they can approach any member of staff for help. Pupils I spoke to were adamant that there is no bullying in the school. They showed a good understanding of the different types of bullying and how they should be tackled. Parents I spoke to, and those who responded to the online questionnaire (Parent View), indicated their children felt safe.

Inspection findings

- You and the governors have effectively managed a series of staff changes and new appointments in recent months. Teachers are continually seeking to improve their practice and respond promptly to any advice given. Staff are given the opportunity to share expertise between the two schools and they benefit from high-quality training. The local authority has provided effective support to improve the skills of middle leaders in checking and evaluating the work in the areas for which they are responsible. This is leading to rapid improvements in

the quality of teaching. In addition, the local authority has supported improvements to the provision in the early years which are enabling a higher proportion of children to reach the level of development expected for their age.

- Improvements to teaching in the early years means that children in the Reception Year make good progress. This is also because there is a range of exciting and interesting activities provided for them. Children showed a clear understanding of symmetry through placing pegs on a pegboard and making kites with symmetrical patterns. Some chose to engage in writing activities, linked to their work on pirates and also polar exploration. They demonstrated that they have a good pencil grip and are quickly learning to form letters correctly. They are able to use their phonics knowledge and skills to write unfamiliar words. Children cooperate well together and show concentration and perseverance in their learning.
- Pupils are proud of their school and have positive attitudes to learning. They fully engage in the tasks provided for them and give well-thought-out responses to teachers' questions. Interesting and stimulating work in a range of topics motivates them to learn. For example, in a Year 1 and 2 class, pupils enjoyed discussing how to write stage directions. They read scripts fluently and expressed their views and opinions with confidence. They were able to discuss how the characters would be feeling, using vocabulary such as 'anguished' and 'ecstatic'. Pupils in Years 3 and 4 were able to identify alliteration, rhyme and repetition in a poem, showing their understanding of poetic features. However, after sampling pupils' work, we agreed that pupils' understanding of grammar, punctuation and spelling, as well as their handwriting and presentation of their work, need to improve.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and their probing questions encourage pupils to think more deeply about their learning. This was evident in the mathematics teaching observed in Years 5 and 6. The work was challenging for pupils and they were expected to give clear explanations and reasons for their answers. In Year 6, pupils were challenged when learning about percentages and they were fully engaged in solving problems, working together to share their ideas.
- Pupils behave well and show consideration and respect to one another and to adults. They are eager to achieve rewards such as house points for good work and effort. They are keen to come to school and, consequently, attendance is high. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is strong and this is deeply rooted in the ethos of the school. Pupils and their parents value the 'family' atmosphere within the school, particularly when older pupils help to look after the younger ones. Pupils show a good understanding of faiths and cultures different to their own and gain valuable insights from the curriculum, visits and visitors, such as a recent visit from people from Sri Lanka. Pupils were able to demonstrate their understanding of Islam and told me they have opportunities to learn about other countries and festivals such as Diwali and Chinese New Year.

- Leaders are ensuring the effective implementation of the new National Curriculum and are aware of the higher expectations of pupils' achievement. New assessment procedures and tracking systems show clear links between pupils' work and the recording of pupils' achievements in their books and class records. Leaders systematically check to ensure that pupils are on track to achieve the expectations for their age and take prompt action to address any underachievement. As a result, pupils are making good progress. Parents I spoke to welcome the regular reports they receive, informing them of how well their children are doing.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils improve their skills in the use of grammar, punctuation and spelling
- pupils improve their handwriting skills and the presentation of their work.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Durham County Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christine Inkster
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short, one day, inspection, I met with you, the deputy headteacher and a group of subject and other leaders. I held meetings with members of the governing body, a group of pupils and three parents. I held a telephone discussion with a representative of the local authority. We visited all classrooms to observe the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, talked to pupils and looked at their work. We discussed your current school self-evaluation and your school improvement plan. I evaluated a range of documents including your records of the monitoring of the quality of teaching, minutes of governing body meetings, pupil performance information, and documents relating to safeguarding. I considered the 17 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View). Pupil and staff questionnaires were not completed as part of this inspection.