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Mrs D Feltham
Headteacher
Sankey Valley St James CE Primary School
Dorchester Road
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Cheshire
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Dear Mrs Feltham

Short inspection of Sankey Valley St James CE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 23 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 March 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 have moulded a team of skilled and passionate staff who share your ambition to provide a high-quality education for your pupils. Central to your success is your honesty and realism in knowing what you are doing well and where you can do better. You waste no time in guiding everyone along the path of improvement. Pupils have the most enjoyable experience at your school. They feel safe, are happy and behave impeccably. I did not see one incident of poor behaviour at any time during the inspection; this is the result of your high expectations and the nurturing, inclusive atmosphere that you have created. Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of your work; the vast majority would recommend the school to others.

Many changes have taken place since your previous inspection in 2011, including your appointment as headteacher. There have been several new governors, including a new Chair of the Governing Body. Almost two thirds of the staff present at this inspection have joined since the previous inspection. It is to your credit that you have managed to maintain the good quality of education at the school.

The previous inspection report noted that improvements were needed in mathematics. Inspectors said that pupils needed to have more opportunities to learn and recall their number facts and that they should use a wider range of mental strategies to solve mathematical problems. You have addressed this point very well. Improvements in mathematics are impressive. You have commissioned the help of experts, working with your staff to focus pupils' learning around the aims of the

mathematics curriculum. In mathematics lessons, pupils are given regular opportunities to develop their number skills. Equally, they are given regular opportunities to reason and explain their thinking, which then allows them to persevere when applying their knowledge to solve problems. Discussions held with pupils on inspection about their work and the work observed in pupils' books confirmed the current, strong progress in mathematics.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding policies are kept up to date and that safeguarding practice is robust. Checks on the suitability of staff to work with children are thorough and record-keeping is meticulous. Detailed records show that, in cases where pupils may be at risk from harm, actions are taken swiftly to protect pupils. Leaders meet regularly to discuss safeguarding matters, making sure that everyone remains focused and informed where risks have been identified. Staff receive regular training on safeguarding matters and share their knowledge with pupils, so that they can help themselves to stay safe. In conversation with inspectors, all pupils said that they felt safe in school and knew how to stay safe, including when online. Every parent spoken to before school and all those who responded to Parent View (Ofsted's online parental questionnaire) agreed that pupils feel safe at school.

Inspection findings

- Leaders and governors have a secure and accurate view of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Your checks on how well the school is performing are accurate and your plans for improvement focus on the correct areas. We did, however, discuss how your improvement plan could be more streamlined, to focus more clearly on those aspects needing most improvement. We also discussed how your targets could be further refined, so that governors can measure more easily the progress being made to achieve them.
- Considering the fact that you and other senior and middle leaders are relatively new to post, it is encouraging to note how well your expectations and ambitions are understood and accepted. Middle leaders have been supported very well to develop the skills needed to lead their areas of responsibility effectively to secure ongoing improvement. School systems are well embedded and understood so that all staff know what is expected of them. When we visited classrooms, observing teaching, looking in pupils' books and speaking to pupils, it was refreshing to note how consistently teachers and other staff were creating opportunities to learn based on your agreed, effective approach.
- Although pupils' attendance improved last year, it was still below the national average and too many pupils were missing school. You have rightly identified this as unacceptable and have redoubled your efforts in making sure that pupils attend more regularly. By working closely with other agencies and also with families, your actions are starting to bear fruit. At the time of the inspection, overall school attendance was above the national average. However, there were

still a handful of pupils missing more lessons than you would like and these pupils' attendance must continue to be monitored very closely.

- You have taken time to develop a curriculum that is interesting and engaging for pupils. Pupils say that learning is fun; older pupils certainly enjoyed their music lessons with African drums and brass instruments. A consistent finding in all classes was the captivation of pupils in their learning. We did not witness any pupils who were not engaged in their learning, nor did I speak to any pupils who could not fully explain what they were doing and why. Teachers and other staff are adept in questioning pupils skilfully, so that they find out what pupils already know and guide their thoughts towards new learning. Investments made in the fabric of the school building, along with securing high-quality resources, also help to provide pupils with the motivation needed for success.
- Disadvantaged pupils achieve well at your school. A senior leader has been assigned to lead this area to keep a careful check on how well pupils are doing. Regular checks take place and plans change course where they are ineffective. You have also dedicated one of your governors to oversee this important area of work. He meets regularly with the leader in charge to discuss plans and progress. It was lovely to read a letter which you received recently from the Department for Education. This celebrated your success over the past five years, in securing positive outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, providing them with a good start in life and preparing them well for future challenges.
- You are successfully addressing one of your main priorities: to improve pupils' outcomes in phonics (letters and the sounds that they make). This has been a key focus for you and although improvements were made last year, there was still more to do. You have drafted in extra support and training for teachers and other staff to make sure that pupils' progress in phonics accelerates. Recent assessments in Year 1 show that current pupils are achieving well in phonics. Around half of pupils are already working at or above the level expected by the end of the year and several more pupils are just below where they should be. Projections show that a very large majority of pupils in Year 1 will pass the phonics check this year. Phonics sessions observed on inspection confirmed the strength of teaching and learning in this aspect. Pupils are learning quickly and show an impressive understanding of letters and sounds.
- Pupils' personal development and behaviour remains a strength of the school. In classes, around school and at playtimes, behaviour is consistently impeccable. Pupils' attitudes to learning are strong; they are keen to learn and keen to impress. They take great pride in their work and enjoy being well rewarded for giving their best in lessons. You have established a nurturing and welcoming atmosphere in all areas of the school. All pupils and staff alike enjoy being part of the school and this has a positive impact on how they conduct themselves. Pupils work well together, sharing their ideas to help each other learn. They say they have lots of friends at school and that bullying is rare or non-existent. Pupils are confident that any incident of bullying would be dealt with quickly and well.
- Governors are committed to the school and share your ambition. They are regular visitors, sharing their skills and giving up time to help broaden the

curriculum. They take their roles as 'critical friends' very seriously and meet often with leaders to provide important support and challenge. They are increasingly involved in monitoring standards in school, such as visiting lessons with leaders to witness learning in action. Leaders share performance information with governors so they can compare the school's performance against other schools nationally. We discussed how it would be helpful to share performance information from all classes with governors on a more regular basis.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- school improvement plans give priority to those areas needing most improvement and progress towards targets can be measured more easily
- performance information from all classes is shared with governors more often.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian Hardman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and the deputy headteacher, the literacy and mathematics leaders and five governors, including the Chair of the Governing Body. I spoke with pupils informally, both in and outside of classrooms and I also met with an adviser from the local authority. I considered a wide range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation, school development plan, documents relating to safeguarding, your monitoring of teaching records, minutes from governing body meetings and information relating to pupils' progress. I visited every class with you to observe teaching, speak with pupils about their learning and to check progress in books. I considered the responses of 30 parents who completed the online Parent View questionnaire. I also spoke with five parents who were dropping pupils off at school.