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Mrs Bernadette Pye
Executive Headteacher
St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School
Hencotes
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Dear Mrs Pye

Short inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School

Following my visit to the school on 15 March 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 June 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The governing body acted swiftly and wisely to secure a highly effective executive headteacher for the school following the retirement of the previous headteacher at the end of the summer term in 2015. The school workforce was remodelled and a head of school position established. The pairing of executive headteacher and head of school has proved extremely effective. Staff are re-energised, standards are rising and a determination to succeed and improve pervades all aspects the school's work. You have ensured that middle leaders have a greater involvement in improving the school further. As a result, they have real ownership of their areas of curriculum responsibility and are driving up standards.

Three areas for improvement were identified at the time of the previous inspection in June 2011. First, to improve leadership and management by strengthening the accuracy of leaders' evaluation of the school's effectiveness, by considering progress of pupils in lesson observations and by focusing improvement planning on pupils' achievement. Second, to improve the quality of teaching. Third, to develop pupils' awareness and experience of the range of different cultures in Britain. Leaders have addressed all areas successfully.

Actions taken recently by the new leadership team are leading to a rapid improvement in the rate at which children in the early years and Year 1 acquire phonics (sounds that letters represent) knowledge. For example, since September, the children in the early years have been taught new knowledge (at just the right

level of difficulty) by highly skilled adults. You are determined that a far greater proportion of pupils than 'broadly average' will achieve the required standard in the Year 1 check on phonics this year. You, quite rightly, believe that 'broadly average' is not good enough for the pupils at St Mary's.

Leaders also identified that standards in mathematics are not as high as they should be throughout the school and that the most-able pupils are not always challenged well enough to achieve the very highest levels at the end of Key Stage 1. The new senior leadership team has implemented a series of high-quality professional development opportunities for the teaching staff. This, together with more consistent application of policies and systems, such as the agreed system for marking and feedback, is leading to better progress in mathematics in most year groups during the current academic year.

You and your staff know each and every child well. Each child's progress and attainment is formally discussed and evaluated regularly by teachers and senior leaders. You ensure that a child receives extra teaching and extra help if that is what that child needs to make good progress. The new early morning nurture group is just one example of the way in which the staff at St Mary's go the extra mile for the pupils who attend.

There are very close links between staff and parents and real partnership working. You encourage parents to come into school to learn more about aspects of school life, such as the new curriculum, the calculations policy in mathematics and the methods that are used to teach phonics. Parents really appreciate these opportunities and they are well attended.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils' safety is at the heart of the work of the school. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Appropriate checks are carried out on all staff, governors and volunteers. Referrals to outside agencies are well managed and thoroughly documented. You, the head of school and the governors have worked diligently to review and update all the school's policies, including the safeguarding policies, since the beginning of the academic year. You also established a safer system for the pupils to enter the school at the beginning of the school day. Parents, although sad that they can no longer choose their children's reading books together in the morning, appreciate your efforts to make the school a safe and secure place for their children to learn and thrive.

Pupils have a very clear awareness of how to keep themselves safe, especially online. Even the youngest pupils were able to explain the dangers of sharing their personal information, such as name, address and age, with strangers. A robust focus on pupils' spiritual, moral and cultural development also promotes safeguarding through the positive impact on pupils' conduct and their tolerant behaviour towards others. Pupils are very well behaved, care for each other well and are an absolute credit to their school.

Inspection findings

- You have very successfully conveyed your high aspirations for the children and the school to all in the school and wider community since taking up post in September 2015. Governors are appreciative of the 'sea change' in the school. Leaders' evaluation of the school's strengths and areas for development is extremely honest and accurate. For example, leaders correctly acknowledge that standards have not been high enough in mathematics over time.
- The school's improvement plans require some development. Although planned actions are correctly focused, there are no specific milestones by which leaders and governors can measure and evaluate progress.
- Members of the governing body, through systems set up by the executive headteacher, formally monitor the work of the school on an agreed and regular basis. They provide considerable challenge to senior and middle leaders because they are well informed about the school's strengths and areas for development.
- Middle leaders have been empowered by the executive headteacher. They understand the pupils' assessment information, take an active part in ensuring that the information is accurate and are beginning to drive the improvement in the subjects for which they have responsibility.
- Consistently good teaching, together with the innovative deployment of staff, is improving standards in phonics and leading to a higher standard of children's writing in the early years. The children in the Reception class love having so many experienced teachers leading their learning in phonics. Similarly, good teaching, together with access to high-quality training, is leading to improved standards in mathematics.
- A high prominence is given to the personal development and welfare of the pupils. Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. Children in the early years and pupils throughout the school have positive attitudes to learning. They like attending school and, as a result, attendance rates have been and remain high.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- all improvement plans include clear milestones for success so that leaders, including governors, can measure the extent to which the school's priorities have been achieved
- there is an even sharper focus on work to improve pupils', including the most-able pupils', attainment and progress in mathematics.

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 Northumberland local authority. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Belita Scott
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection, I discussed the work of the school with you, the head of school, the subject leader for mathematics and three governors, including the Chair of the Governing Body. I also had telephone conversations with representatives of Northumberland local authority and the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. I spoke to pupils in lessons, at breaktimes and met more formally with a group of six pupils. I scrutinised a range of documentation about the monitoring and evaluation of school performance, and teaching and learning. I also read the school improvement plan. I examined information about pupils' progress, considered external evaluations of the school's work and considered 25 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I visited all classes to observe teaching, learning and assessment, some alongside you. I also considered samples of work in pupils' books.