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Mrs Louise Finlay
Headteacher
Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Primary School
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Dear Mrs Finlay

Short inspection of Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 4 October 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 April 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

In the short space of time since you joined the school, you have built a strong working partnership with your capable deputy headteacher. Together, you have established an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. You have taken the time to listen to parents, staff and pupils, as well as commissioning an external review, before putting your 'rapid improvement plan' in place. You have both earned the trust and respect of your colleagues, who have heartily embraced the challenges you have set them. Governors, staff, pupils and parents have confidence in your leadership and appreciate that you are readily available and always willing to make time to talk.

Your pupils are polite and respectful. They look smart in their uniforms and are excellent ambassadors for your school, receiving compliments whenever they are out on trips and visits. Pupils hold their teachers in high esteem and are keen to please them. Pupils are keen to help, willingly taking on responsibilities such as 'Max Agents' who act as peer mentors, and as classroom helpers. Pupils play harmoniously together at playtimes and lunchtimes and any disagreements are quickly resolved. Pupils, staff and parents describe Our Lady Star of the Sea as a happy, successful school which is highly regarded in the local community. As a result, everyone is proud of their school.

You have used your time well since joining the school. You have made sure that you fully understand the reasons why some aspects of the school's performance are not as strong as they could be. The new ways of working that you have introduced have already made a positive difference. For example, you found that younger pupils were not learning to read as quickly as they should. You identified that phonics lessons were not happening every day and not all staff had the skills, knowledge and experience to teach reading effectively. Since you have put in place training for staff, reorganised the pupil groupings and insisted on daily timetabled lessons, standards in reading at the end of both Year 1 and Year 2 have rapidly improved.

You and the deputy headteacher have made sure that you have tackled those areas of improvement identified in the last inspection report. You have improved the outdoor areas in the early years foundation stage so that children are able to be more independent and make their own choices. Consequently, most children are achieving a good level of development by the end of Reception.

Parents, staff and pupils talked to me enthusiastically about the new positive behaviour management system you have introduced. You recognised that pupils' behaviour, both in class and around school, was exemplary. However, you knew that more needed to be done so that all your pupils learn that effort, persistence, trying different strategies and learning from mistakes will help them achieve their full potential. When we visited classes and talked to pupils, it was clear that this focus on rewarding learning behaviours, such as resilience, is having a positive effect. Pupils were contributing their ideas to class and group discussions in guided reading, having a go at devising their own examples of personification, reading aloud their personal responses to a prayer and editing their biographies of Winston Churchill. Consequently, classrooms buzz with excitement as pupils go about their learning activities, and key stage 2 pupils are now making faster progress in writing and mathematics.

Parents told me that they like receiving the instant messages when their child has earned a reward, as well as the teachers' regular online updates about what pupils have been doing in school. This has addressed some concerns from parents, particularly those who are working, about the frequency with which they were receiving information about how their child was getting on at school.

As you move into your second year of headship and the priorities you set out in your 'rapid improvement plan' have been addressed, you and the leadership team are now working on a long-term school improvement plan. This plan is underpinned by a robust evidence base, so that you have an accurate view of the most pressing issues. Governors and staff are encouraged by the successes of recent months, such as the increase in the numbers of pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, achieving higher standards in grammar, punctuation and spelling. These successes have secured staff and governors' confidence that the school is in safe hands and given them cause for optimism about the future for Our Lady Star of the Sea.

Governors talked to me about the challenges that they had faced in recruiting high-calibre senior leaders to the school. While they are delighted with the appointments that they have made, they are aware that the school lost ground during a long period of uncertainty following the previous inspection. Governors have balanced well the need to keep a close eye on the school's performance while letting the new leadership team get on with the job in hand. Governors have made sure that leaders have delivered on the actions set out in the 'rapid improvement plan' and that the actions put in place have been making a positive difference to pupils' outcomes.

However, governors have not kept up with the current government requirements for the publication of information, including on admissions, pupil premium and special educational needs and/or disabilities, on the school's website. Governors acknowledge this oversight and intend to address this as a matter of urgency.

Safeguarding is effective.

This school is a safe place where pupils are well cared for. Leaders make sure that checks on the suitability of new staff to work with children are thorough. All staff and governors are well trained to identify and follow up on any safeguarding concerns. The introduction of an online reporting and recording system has been well received by staff. They told me that it helps them spot any causes for concern much more quickly, as well as securing robust, reliable lines of communication. Pupils and their families value the comprehensive support which the school gives to them when they need it. Pupils trust the adults who work in their school and know that staff will always make the time to talk to them. Pupils told me that incidents of bullying are very rare and that they are confident that staff would intervene effectively as and when required. Leaders have ensured that pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe online and are aware of risks, such as drug and alcohol misuse.

Inspection findings

- Staff morale is high. Staff share your vision for the school and are keen to play their part in realising this vision. Despite the number of changes you have put in place to secure the rapid improvements which were needed, staff feel well supported by senior leaders. The daily team briefings, focused staff meetings and bespoke training have made sure that everyone feels that the changes are well managed. Staff appreciate your willingness to listen to and act on their suggestions.
- Last year, you prioritised raising standards in reading at key stage 1. The improvements you put in place have made a positive difference to all pupils, including disadvantaged pupils. You have ensured that almost all Year 1 pupils met the standard in the phonics screening check in 2016. Moreover, all the pupils who were re-checked in Year 2 met the standard this year. This focus on reading in key stage 1 has paid dividends, reversing the previously declining trend.

- You have now set your sights on accelerating pupils' progress in reading across key stage 2. We visited guided reading lessons in Year 3 and Year 6 to see the changes you have put in place. The frequent, small-group, focused reading lessons are helping pupils to develop their comprehension skills as they apply them to more complex pieces of writing. In Year 6, pupils were grappling with an extract from Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings', finding and explaining some examples of personification.
- The deputy headteacher shared with me the rationale for the design of your curriculum. You have given careful consideration to how you teach the different subjects and are continually tweaking the model when you find ways of improving it. You have balanced discrete subject teaching with some topic-based learning. You are using the expertise of your subject-specialist colleagues in the adjacent secondary school to help you improve the quality of teaching in some subjects such as art. The introduction of cross-curricular learning logs is reinforcing your expectation of pupils maintaining their high literacy and numeracy standards across all subjects.
- You have given careful consideration to the alignment of your Catholic values with fundamental British values. The correspondence of your half-termly focus on one particular value with the liturgical calendar is well considered. For example, you have planned to focus on individual liberty as you prepare for Easter. You have not shied away from some difficult topics. For example, you raised older pupils' awareness of the Irish Republican Army's bombing campaign last century when talking about terrorism today, following the attacks in Paris.
- The recent changes to homework have been well received. Pupils enjoy selecting which tasks they would like to complete over the half term. Pupils and parents are impressed by the range of tasks offered. This term, pupils have the chance to make bread following a Stone Age recipe, write a poem in the style of Roald Dahl or to learn a song and perform it to the class. Your recent meetings have helped the parents of the youngest children to support them with their reading.
- While you have strengthened the plans you have for disadvantaged pupils, you recognise that there is still more to do to make sure that these pupils achieve as well as other pupils nationally. You recognise the need to write more bespoke plans for these pupils to better meet their diverse needs. When I spoke to some disadvantaged pupils, they were overwhelmingly positive about your school. Pupils who had joined from other schools describe it as the best school they have been to. Disadvantaged pupils enthusiastically take part in the wealth of sporting, creative and musical opportunities you offer. Disadvantaged pupils rate the levels of pastoral care very highly and recognise the very real difference it makes to have someone who helps them to sort out any problems or listen to worries.
- Governors and senior leaders have not shied away from tackling underperformance. Governors challenge leaders to make sure that milestones are being met in the 'rapid improvement plan'. While they are committed to the professional development of staff, governors are clear that their first duty is to the pupils. Governors and senior leaders have strengthened the quality of teaching and, following a reorganisation, have ensured that there is a good balance of skills, expertise and experience across each department. As a result, pupils' learning has got off to a brisk start this term.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- keep the school's website up to date and compliant with current government requirements
- further develop the strategy in respect of the pupil premium allocation, so that the difference between the achievement of your disadvantaged pupils and that of other pupils nationally diminishes
- embed the changes to the teaching of reading at key stage 2, making sure that all pupils make strong progress from their different starting points.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the diocese of Shrewsbury, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cheshire West and Chester. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Pippa Jackson Maitland

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

Prior to the inspection, I identified a number of lines of enquiry which informed the focus of my work in the school.

- What are the reasons for the decline in standards in reading across the school? Have leaders reversed this trend in 2016?
- How well is the pupil premium being spent to ensure that disadvantaged pupils across the school catch up quickly with all pupils nationally?
- How effective are the actions of leaders and managers to keep pupils safe?
- Is the curriculum devised by the school fit for purpose? How well considered is the rationale behind its design, and how effective is its implementation? How well is evaluation used to refine and improve the curriculum?

During the inspection, I met with you and the deputy headteacher, teaching and support staff, and the chair and a member of the governing body. I also spoke with a representative from the local authority. I considered the 23 responses from parents to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and spoke to parents at the start of the school day. I met formally with a group of staff and considered the 12 responses to Ofsted's online survey of staff. I spoke to a group of pupils. We visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning, looked at books and talked to pupils. We also observed pupils at the beginning of the school day as well as during

lunchtime. We looked at information about pupils' progress and attainment and the school's self-evaluation and action plans. I conducted a full review of safeguarding, including an evaluation of the school's procedures and policies to keep pupils safe, its training records, recruitment checks and record-keeping.