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Mrs Jill Southern
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Southern

Short inspection of St Stephen's CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 5 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 January 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Senior leaders have worked relentlessly to reverse the unexpected dip in achievement in 2015 to good effect. As a result, pupils are making good and better progress. The most able pupils make accelerated progress. A higher than average proportion of this group achieved high scores in reading, writing and mathematics.

Mathematics was an area for improvement from the previous inspection. When I asked pupils what they liked best about the school, many of them said 'maths!' I observed pupils making excellent progress in mathematics and pupils now achieve very good results in mathematics at the end of Year 6.

Although you have only been the headteacher for a few weeks, you have already had a big impact. Your expectations are high and you take swift action when you find things that are not right or do not meet with your expectations. One parent rightly commented, 'I feel that she brings a warmth and wealth of experience... she is very approachable and genuinely cares about the children.'

Pupils learn well at this school and make good progress because of a strong and inclusive leadership team. The school provides a pleasant environment that encourages pupils to share their knowledge of history, geography and religious education alongside the core subjects. There is a wide range of informative

displays, including art work and clay work, authentic-looking manuscripts from the time of Queen Elizabeth I and high-quality pieces of extended writing.

The monitoring of teaching and learning is rigorous. Leaders and governors know where the strengths and weaknesses lie. Consequently, pupils achieve well across the vast majority of subjects. However, their ability to spell and use grammar currently lags behind other areas of the curriculum. This is because the teaching of phonics and early writing in Reception is not good enough.

There is a highly skilled governing body. Governors use their collective expertise to ask the right questions and challenge senior leaders. They are working hard to communicate better with parents and a number of parents reported to me that communication has improved; they like the new newsletters. However, governors have not paid as much attention to the school website to ensure that it meets all of the statutory requirements.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, managers and governors take safeguarding seriously. Policies are regularly reviewed and staff training is updated, but the most up-to-date policies are not always posted on the school website. Incidents of poor behaviour or bullying are carefully logged with the outcomes of actions taken clearly recorded. Staff receive regular child protection updates and are confident to report a child protection concern to senior leaders in a timely manner.

Inspection findings

- You set high standards for your pupils and your team. Differences in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and that of their peers are diminishing. There was no difference in the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and that of their peers in sessions observed, including in books scrutinised.
- Standards in Year 4 and Year 6 are among the highest in the school. Pupils behave exceptionally well and make rapid progress due to the sterling efforts of these senior leaders. Pupils are eager to learn. The most able work through algebraic challenges at pace while the least able pupils learn well because of the work of the highly skilled inclusion manager. Classrooms are stimulating and immaculately presented; expectations are high, with no excuses being accepted for work that is less than good.
- I listened to pupils reading in Year 5. They showed very strong skills in decoding words and a good understanding of their meaning. Reading records show that they read regularly at school and at home.
- I observed the teaching of phonics in Year 1 where a teaching assistant taught the less able pupils well. She ensured that pupils could accurately pronounce the sound 'igh' and then successfully encouraged them to construct words containing the sound. They made really good progress because she had excellent knowledge of phonics with very clear and accurate pronunciation. Consequently, most pupils were able to write the words spoken and those who struggled were given swift and appropriate help.

- I observed less effective teaching of phonics in Reception. Children were taught rhyming words, but for many this was too easy and some of them became disengaged. Children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities made little progress because the activity was not well matched to their needs.
- I looked at a wide selection of writing in topic books. Pupils write well in almost all year groups and marking picks up any errors that are then responded to by pupils. However, the standard of writing accepted in Year 3 books is not good enough and there are many missed opportunities to promote mark making and early writing in Reception, particularly in the outdoor provision.
- There is a clear and effective system for behaviour management. Pupils behave extremely well in most classes because of high expectations and careful planning for different needs. However, in the early years and in Year 3, behaviour is not always of the same high standard because expectations are sometimes too low and learning is not adapted well enough for different abilities.
- The overwhelming majority of pupils behave impeccably. They are polite and keen to praise their school. However, a very small minority do not always live up to the high expectations. Records show that, although these pupils are dealt with appropriately, sanctions for poor behaviour are not always communicated well enough to parents.
- Pupils I spoke to said that they feel safe in school. All parents I spoke to echoed these views and felt that their children were safe in school and that behaviour was good.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- provision in the early years and Year 3 is strengthened
- standards of spelling, grammar and punctuation continue to improve
- policies are regularly reviewed and the school website meets the government's expectations.

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

Yours sincerely

Sally Kenyon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and the senior leadership team, a representative from the local schools consortia and members of the governing body. I observed teaching in all classes. My work focused on how well pupils were doing in their writing, their attendance and behaviour, and the achievement of the most able and disadvantaged pupils.

I spoke with staff and pupils at social times, listened to pupils read and scrutinised reading records and writing books. I analysed the single central record and records of child protection and we looked at aspects of safeguarding together. I scrutinised the school website, school policies, self-evaluation documentation and school improvement planning. I spoke with approximately 15 parents. I considered the 27 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, including a number of free-text comments made by parents.