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Mr Paul Mitchell
Executive Principal
St Matthew's Church of England Academy
Lightwood Road
Rough Close
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ST3 7NE

Dear Mr Mitchell

Short inspection of St Matthew's Church of England Academy

Following my visit to the school on 18 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in July 2011.

This school continues to be good.

This is a good school that, after a few ups and downs following the previous inspection, is now on an even keel and heading in the right direction.

You took up the post of executive principal in September 2016. Since then, you have been quick to gain the trust of staff and understand the key features of the school. You recognise and celebrate the school's many successes, but are bringing purposeful challenge where necessary.

The previous inspection recommended some improvements in key stage 1 and early years. The school has made strides forwards in both these areas, although the outdoor space is still rather limited due to the size of the school site.

This inspection found that the current quality of teaching is effective, academic standards are above average and pupils feel safe, happy and behave well at school. Even so, we both recognised that aspects of the school's work could be improved. Specifically, the level of challenge provided by some teaching is not quite right at times and pupils' work can be untidy or careless. You are addressing these areas through training and by sharing effective practice. Staff value your support and respond well. In addition, the school governors realise that they too could improve the efficiency of their work.

Parents, many of whom travel some distance to bring their children to the school,

speak positively about its caring ethos, the approachability of staff and the quality of education provided. Of the parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, 100% would recommend the school to other parents.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff understand exactly what to do if they have a concern about a child. My checks on your procedures found that when concerns have arisen, you and your staff have acted swiftly. You make sure that all the necessary information is passed on to the right people in the right way.

The administration of safeguarding and safety-related matters is efficient. All the proper checks on staff and visitors are carried out, recorded properly and stored with due regard for confidentiality. When pupils arrive at or leave the school you check that records are transferred promptly and securely. Logs of fire drills, risk assessments and records of pupils' medical information are all up to date and readily to hand when needed. The minutes from staff and governors' meetings note that safeguarding is a frequent subject for discussion, which helps to keep it uppermost in everyone's minds.

Pupils are taught about the risks they may face and how to deal with these in a sensible way. In the school hall, a recent display records pupils' responses to questions about how to stay safe. The variety of responses serve to highlight pupils' awareness of different types of bullying, internet safety and what do if they are scared, upset or unsure. Pupils report that unkind behaviour hardly ever happens and that they trust other pupils or adults at the school to help them.

There is some building work going on at the school and the road outside can be very busy at the beginning and end of the school day. Appropriate supervision arrangements, including a lollipop lady to see pupils across the road at the beginning and end of the day, serve to keep everyone safe.

Inspection findings

- In September 2016, a new leadership structure was put in place at St Matthew's Church of England Academy. As the executive principal, you are responsible for the overall leadership of the school, while a head of school is now in charge of day-to-day operational matters. It is early days, but so far this arrangement is working well. You have established a good working relationship with the head of school and have quickly gained the trust of staff and parents. You have an accurate understanding of the school's current performance and your plans for school improvement are well informed and ambitious.
- Your leadership of teaching is calm, measured and inspires confidence. School records show that you regularly check teaching and pupils' work and arrange training and in-school support when necessary. You have established an evaluative and supportive culture of ongoing school improvement. Consequently, staff are kept up to date with current practice, say that they feel supported and know what is expected from them.
- Due to the small numbers in each year group, it is hard to describe a typical

intake of pupils. It is possible, however, to confirm that, whatever their different starting points, all pupils make good progress at this school. Any children who start school with levels of skill and knowledge below those typically expected for their age get help to catch up. Those who are already ahead of others forge further ahead. In almost all cases, children settle in quickly, acquire good learning habits and learn to take responsibility. At the time of this inspection, the reception-age children had been in school for just six weeks. Already, all understood classroom expectations, showed an ability to concentrate and persevere at tasks and willingly cooperated with others.

- In one striking example, a group of children in the reading area took it upon themselves to find and copy text from story books in order to practise their handwriting and teach others. Their pencil grip was excellent and their letter formation was neat and accurate. They clearly enjoyed reading, writing and playing with words and talked with animated interest about the stories and what they had written. Their levels of organisation and independence were most impressive and they responded exceptionally well to the routines and expectations established in the class. It is no surprise that children quickly become accomplished readers and that, across the school, pupils' writing is well put together and interesting to read.
- Since the previous inspection, the school has undergone a few changes of staff and converted to an academy in 2013. The academy trust recognises that the school has had some ups and downs and that the good standards currently seen were not always evident in the period just after the previous inspection. In more recent times, however, academic standards have strengthened again. This is most evident in key stage 1, where standards in reading, writing and mathematics have risen year after year and are consistently above average.
- In key stage 2, standards have fluctuated from one year to the next. In part, this is due to the impact of small numbers of pupils on statistics, but there is another factor too. Specifically, some pupils' progress in mathematics across key stage 2 slowed because of a dip in the quality of teaching. This has now been resolved; the current quality of teaching is good and mathematics standards are above average. That said, some key stage 2 teaching could still be refined further. On occasions, some pupils' mistakes or misunderstandings are not noticed soon enough by staff. In a few instances, teachers' explanations are too complicated, so some of the middle- and lower-ability pupils get confused.
- On the other hand, the most able pupils are doing very well indeed. Teachers' subject knowledge is up to the mark and staff respond swiftly to pupils who are quick to understand. In all classes, teachers provide these pupils with plenty of work that feeds their curiosity, makes them think deeply and extends their knowledge and understanding.
- During this inspection, a telling example of the effectiveness of mathematics teaching was seen, highlighting both a key strength and an area for improvement. In a Year 5 and 6 class, mathematics teaching was pitched at a challenging level. Some pupils were unsure and found it hard to keep up and a few made mistakes that went undetected. Work in their books and our conversations during this inspection revealed that this scenario is not a common occurrence, but it does happen when the pitch of teaching is not quite right. In contrast, the very brightest pupils relished the challenge, completed tasks with

success and pushed on with new learning.

- Standards in English have been more even over time. The reasons for this have their roots in the school's excellent attention to pupils' early reading and writing skills. In addition, as pupils move up through the different classes, they are given many meaningful opportunities to write. Plenty of evidence of this was seen during the inspection – in books, on displays and in classroom practice. In Years 3 and 4, for example, pupils of all abilities were inspired to compose descriptive paragraphs about a scenic view. Teaching focused carefully on structure and grammar but also reminded pupils about the need to create interest and drama. Pupils responded with keen, capable enthusiasm and produced some great work. In Years 1 and 2, the same attention to key literacy skills also shines out. Consequently, all pupils keep up and make good progress in their English work. The quality of handwriting in the school, however, is very variable. In the early years, as already noted, children demonstrate some impressive handwriting skills, but this is not so apparent elsewhere. Some pupils write neatly and with care; others do not. Furthermore, there does not appear to be an agreed approach to handwriting at the school.
- Disadvantaged pupils often achieve highly at St Matthew's Church of England Academy. In recent years, these pupils have made better progress and reached higher standards than other pupils nationally. This is due to a supportive working relationship between school and home and effective use of funding. These factors ensure that provision for this group of pupils enables them to reach the highest standards they can.
- The previous inspection advised school leaders to improve the opportunities for outdoor learning in the early years provision. Currently, the school site is undergoing some building works, which affects a significant part of the outdoor area. It is, therefore, hard to evaluate the impact of any changes that have happened in response to this earlier recommendation. Nevertheless, staff and pupils make the best use of the available space.
- The school's new website has had a few teething problems and some required information is missing. You have plans in place to address this and, indeed, some of the omissions were rectified during my visit. All the information that should be published online is readily available in school and you are aware of website requirements. I am confident that you are already attending to this administrative matter with urgency.
- Governors have embraced the school's conversion to academy status and value the support and input provided by the academy trust. They receive regular reports about teaching and standards and have attended training. Governors understand that it is their job to set and steer the strategic direction for the school and believe that governance is increasingly effective in this role. Even so, they realise they could do more. To this end, governors have reorganised their arrangements for meetings and liaise regularly with key staff. The academy trust offers various training, meetings and updates and governors do attend some of these events. Nevertheless, governors have not established a clear routine for doing so. Consequently, they are missing out on some valuable advice that would support them in their roles and sharpen their evaluative skills.
- Pupils' behaviour is a strength of the school. Good conduct and polite manners are the norm and poor behaviour is rare. Older pupils instinctively care for

younger pupils; looking out for them on the playground, serving breaktime snacks and organising games. No one is left out or made to feel uncomfortable, and any upsets that do occur are sorted out quickly. Pupils and their parents express high levels of confidence in the level of care provided.

- Pupils have a say in how things are done at school and there are several active committees that assist this, including a school council, an eco-group and even a health and safety committee. Through such active involvement in decision-making, and by taking on other responsibilities such as head boy or girl, pupils are helped to grow in confidence and understand democratic processes. They also come to realise that their ideas and efforts can bring about change for the better and help others.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- Continue to strengthen teaching by:
 - sharing and learning from the most effective practice in this and other schools
 - providing bespoke staff training in response to need
 - making sure that teachers' explanations are not too complicated for those pupils who do not understand
 - making sure that pupils' mistakes or misunderstandings in lessons are picked up in a timely manner so that teaching can be adjusted
 - agreeing upon whole-school expectations for handwriting.
- Strengthen governance by ensuring that governors make the most of the support and challenge offered through the academy trust.

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

Yours sincerely

Martin Pye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, your staff and three governors. I also met with two advisers from the Church of England Central Academy Trust (CECET). I carried out short observations of teaching in all classes, looked at pupils' work and listened to some pupils read. I also talked with pupils in lessons, on the playground and in the dining hall. In addition, I spoke with parents at the beginning of the school day.

I paid particular attention to several key lines of enquiry. These included the

achievement of different groups of pupils and how well key stage 2 teaching is building upon the increasingly higher standards coming up from key stage 1. Other lines of enquiry related to aspects of leadership, governance and safeguarding.

By the end of the inspection, there were 17 recent responses on Parent View and nine written comments. I took account of these and talked with pupils about how school staff listened to their views. I looked at a number of documents, including: pupils' progress information; the school's own evaluation of its performance; information about the work of the governing body; records of leaders' checks on the quality of teaching and learning; and several school policy documents. I also checked the school's website and the procedures for keeping pupils safe. I asked members of staff and parents about safeguarding matters.