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Mrs Lorraine McEvoy
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Dear Mrs McEvoy

Short inspection of St Albert's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 6 December 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 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You provide inspirational and motivating leadership, so staff morale is high and they have a deep loyalty to the school. Leaders at all levels make a good contribution to secure improvement where it is needed. Staff provide pupils with imaginative and memorable experiences that support their learning effectively in all subjects. The enthusiasm of teaching staff motivates pupils, develops their curiosity and instils joy in learning. Your school's vision, to inspire children, give them high aspirations and help them to realise their dreams, is supported by all staff. Pupils develop good personal skills and an excellent understanding of the world beyond their immediate surroundings. They are very well prepared for the next stage in their education.

Staff have dealt successfully with the areas for improvement that were identified at the last inspection. The most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, are provided with activities that challenge their thinking and require them to work hard. Teaching for greater depth in mathematics is a strength across the school; pupils' reasoning and problem-solving skills are developed effectively. The most able pupils are also provided with challenging reading and writing activities, although few pupils are currently working at greater depth in these subjects. You are monitoring the teaching and progress of the most able pupils closely to make sure that teaching supports them to attain as well as possible. Pupils' handwriting has improved since you introduced a consistent approach from the early years onwards.

The governing body has become more effective since the last inspection when its monitoring and evaluation of the school's work was not robust enough. New governors, including the chair, have undertaken training to make sure that they are fully up to date with statutory requirements and learn from good practice. Governors have a good range of expertise and an excellent understanding of the data and strengths and weaknesses in the school's performance. They ensure that objectives set for staff and leaders are closely aligned to school improvement priorities. Leaders and governors have good capacity to continue to improve the school.

Pupils' outcomes are typically good over time. Up to 2015, pupils' attainment in the standardised assessments at the end of Year 2 and Year 6 in reading, writing and mathematics was average or above. Pupils made very good progress from their lower than usual starting points. Results in the Year 6 2016 standardised tests dipped significantly, however. The proportion of pupils who reached expected standards was well below average.

You have analysed the reasons for this dip in 2016 test results thoroughly. An unusually high proportion of this small cohort had special educational needs or joined the school late in key stage 2. A number of pupils did not do as well in the tests as their work in lessons and books suggested they should. They did not work quickly enough in the reading and mathematics tests to finish, so while they answered what they did correctly, they did not gain enough marks to reach expected standards. In writing, pupils' spelling let them down. You are taking effective action to make sure that teaching addresses the issues you have identified.

The outcomes of pupils who are currently in school are good. Children enter the school with knowledge and skills that are mostly below those typical for their age, particularly in communication, language and literacy. Children grow in confidence and learn effectively in the magical, inspiring environment in the early years. Their language and literacy skills are supported exceptionally well so they make rapid gains. The proportion of children who achieve a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year has been steadily improving and was in line with the national average in 2016. The upward trend is continuing.

The majority of pupils in the Year 2 and Year 6 classes are working at the standards expected for their age and have made at least expected progress from their starting points in reading, writing and mathematics. Teachers have a good understanding of the national curriculum expectations in each year group and are building on pupils' skills systematically in all subjects. Pupils are making more rapid progress in reading since the teaching of comprehension skills has been a focus for teacher training and has improved across the school. Pupils in Year 6 read with independence and have a range of strategies to work out meaning and extract information. The most able pupils read fluently and are given challenging texts to develop their thinking skills. Pupils who are behind in their learning are given effective support to catch up quickly.

Parents, grandparents and carers who made their views known are extremely

positive about the school. They are particularly praising of the support for pupils who have medical needs and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. 'The school has fantastic staff who work hard to create a positive and engaging environment for their pupils. Topical subjects are always highly imaginative and brilliantly engaging across the school' is typical of the comments received. The inspection endorses their positive views.

Safeguarding is effective.

Ensuring that children are safe is a responsibility that all staff and governors uphold vigilantly. Policies, procedures and records are fit for purpose. Staff, governors and everyone who works with pupils are vetted thoroughly. All staff and governors have completed training that is relevant to their roles and they receive regular updates. They are knowledgeable and know what to do if they have any concerns. Vulnerable pupils and their families are supported exceptionally well. You ensure that early help is provided for families who need it and other agencies are involved to support them appropriately.

Adults provide a safe and nurturing environment so pupils feel safe, happy and well cared for in school. Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe online, in the home and outside because they are taught about risks and potential dangers. Parents are also informed about how to minimise risk of cyber bullying. Tackling sexual exploitation is a local authority focus; staff have attended training and pupils are taught how to keep themselves safe from such harm. Pupils and parents who made their views known are confident that bullying is not an issue in school. Pupils have a good understanding of what bullying is, including, for example, using racist or homophobic language. Any incidents are dealt with instantly and sensitively. Pupils' attendance is improving over time and is currently close to the national average.

Inspection findings

- Leaders and governors monitor teaching and pupils' progress rigorously and manage the performance of teachers effectively. This ensures that strengths in teaching are celebrated and any weaknesses are dealt with.
- You track pupils' progress carefully to ensure that pupils of all abilities are making at least expected progress. Effective challenge or support is provided if pupils are falling behind expectations.
- Self-evaluation is probing and accurate. Staff and governors work together to secure improvement with determination.
- You have investigated the dip in standards in 2016 thoroughly and put robust action plans in place to make sure standards improve. The school development plan is supported by astute planning to improve teaching and raise pupils' achievement in reading, writing and mathematics. Leaders are monitoring the impact of actions carefully; these actions are already having a positive impact on pupils' learning.
- Partnership working is highly effective. You are outward-looking and buy in external evaluation to provide an objective view of the school's work. Thorough

audits, for example in safeguarding procedures, and probing reports from your school improvement partner, local authority and archdiocesan advisers add to governors' knowledge and inform your planning for improvement. Your collaborative work with other schools and close partnership with St Brigid's provide further support and challenge.

- Staff at all stages of their career are encouraged to develop their skills, share good practice and lead initiatives in school. Newly qualified teachers have benefitted from high-quality mentoring, good training and opportunities to observe best practice in other schools as well as St Albert's.
- Leaders at all levels attend external courses to develop their leadership skills. They are innovative and lead improvements in their area of responsibility effectively.
- Links with secondary schools are good. Pupils transfer to a large number of different secondary schools across local authority borders and you ensure that the schools receive detailed information about pupils' learning needs. For the 2016 cohort, you have ensured that schools had full details of pupils' abilities and examples of their work, where test results did not reflect their full capability.
- The early years provision is led very successfully by a knowledgeable and enthusiastic early years specialist. The provision for two-year-olds develops children's language and social skills rapidly from an early age in a stimulating and nurturing setting.
- The enchanting environment in the Nursery and Reception areas encourages children to learn and discover. Children take great delight in experimenting and creating in the 'play pod', investigating the wildlife in the forest school area, performing on the stage and exploring the many exciting activities provided for them. Children's social, language, literacy and number skills are developed in all areas of learning so they make rapid progress in these aspects. Children are prepared well for the next stage of their learning in Year 1.
- Curriculum planning is good across key stages 1 and 2. Teachers provide pupils with rich learning experiences that develop their knowledge and skills in a broad range of subjects successfully. Pupils' learning is enriched through additional activities in the before- and after-school clubs, through forest school activities, themed weeks and visits out of school.
- Governors ensure that the pupil premium enhances the learning of disadvantaged pupils of all ability. For example, specialist speech and language support helps those with specific learning difficulties and mastery classes help the most able disadvantaged pupils to deepen their learning.
- Additional sports funding is used to good effect to broaden pupils' participation and develop teachers' ability to teach a wide range of sports and physical activities.
- Pupils' personal skills and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding are developed exceptionally well in all classes. The promotion of British values is also a strength. The 'Information Stations', which take place for a short time each morning, are an interesting and highly effective approach to teaching pupils about current affairs, moral and global issues. For example, pupils in Year 5 had a lively debate about the law forbidding smoking in cars where there are children. The teacher skilfully prompted pupils to consider counter-arguments and developed their understanding of freedom of choice, rule of law and personal rights successfully.

- Pupils are keen to learn and proud of their achievements. They behave sensibly and considerately around school and in lessons. A few pupils who have behaviour difficulties are supported well to help them manage their own behaviour and ensure that they do not disrupt the learning of others. The special educational needs leaders and learning mentor provide good support and advice where appropriate.
- The school is extremely well maintained, clean and well organised. The stimulating display around school and in classes celebrates pupils' work and achievements and supports their learning. It is clear that everyone takes great pride in their school.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and full understanding of the demands of the national curriculum. Teachers are skilled at questioning and prompting pupils to probe their understanding and extend their learning.
- Assessment is used effectively to build on pupils' knowledge and skills. Teaching meets pupils' learning needs well and increasingly helps them to attain at the standards expected for their age.
- Teaching assistants support teaching and learning effectively. Good-quality training ensures that they develop their knowledge and skills so that they can support the learning of pupils of all abilities in class or small groups.
- Mathematics is taught effectively. Pupils apply their knowledge, solve problems and carry out investigations enthusiastically. You are rightly checking closely that the most able pupils are challenged to achieve greater depth in their learning.
- The writing in pupils' books is of good quality and varied. However, pupils' spelling lags behind their use of grammar and punctuation and knowledge of the features of text. Some pupils are overly reliant on phonics because they have not learned alternative strategies. For example, they have not learned common word endings linked to meaning, letter combinations or patterns in spelling.
- Reading skills are taught effectively; pupils are taught to deduce meaning from texts and supported to develop a range of effective strategies.
- The majority of pupils are able to work at the standards expected for their age. Some pupils do not consistently finish their work in the time allocated, however, because they work too slowly. This was a contributing factor in the low attainment in the 2016 tests.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils secure their learning at the standards expected for their age in reading, writing and mathematics in each class, so that the proportion of pupils who achieve expected standards at the end of each key stage increases
- the most able pupils work at greater depth in reading and writing
- pupils are taught spelling patterns, high-frequency words and spelling strategies systematically from Year 1 onwards
- pupils are helped to work at greater speed and develop strategies for understanding questions quickly.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education

for the Archdiocese of Liverpool, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jean Olsson-Law
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I had meetings with you and the senior leadership team, five governors, most teaching staff, the local authority adviser, the archdiocesan adviser and a group of pupils. I observed teaching and learning in the early years, Year 2, Year 5 and Year 6 and spoke to pupils during lessons. I carried out a detailed scrutiny of pupils' writing and their work in mathematics across the whole school, observed reading lessons and heard several pupils from Year 6 read. I spoke with parents at the school entrance and took account of the five responses to Parent View, the Ofsted online questionnaire. I also considered the one pupil response and the six staff responses to questionnaires. I looked at information about pupils' progress and attainment and at your self-evaluation and action planning. I evaluated safeguarding procedures, including policies to keep children safe and records of training, safeguarding checks and behaviour management.

I considered the following lines of enquiry:

- how effectively the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection have been dealt with, including the effectiveness of the governing body and challenge for the most able pupils
- the quality of curriculum planning and effectiveness of teaching in enabling pupils to attain at the standards expected for their age
- why pupils' attainment was lower than that which is typical for the school in the 2016 standardised assessments
- how well pupils currently in school are achieving
- the quality of leadership and management.