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Mrs Carol Woods
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Woods

Short inspection of Altham St James Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 8 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 October 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Parents, staff, pupils and governors are delighted with the improvements you have made to the school. They appreciate your quiet, determined leadership style. When you were first appointed, you took time to understand the school so that you were able to build on the existing strengths and resolve the weaknesses. You have put your school at the heart of its community, raised standards, and reignited staff and pupils' passion for learning.

You recognise both the opportunities and challenges that your small school presents. Staff and governors are impressed with your ability to get things done. For example, Years 5 and 6 now have a bright, spacious classroom for their English and mathematics lessons. You have made sure that your pupils enjoy a wealth of visitors, trips and clubs, teachers regularly attend training and staff are deployed to best effect.

At the previous inspection, the inspector reported on the strength of the school's care, guidance and support. The views of your current pupils and parents, and my observations in all areas of school, confirm that this strength has been maintained. Parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, commented on the 'nurturing environment', that the school is a 'lovely school' and how it feels 'more like a family'.

The inspector identified two areas for improvement. First, he asked the school to improve the quality of teaching to good or better. You have prioritised support and training for all staff, particularly in English and mathematics. Outcomes for children at the end of the early years and key stage 1 have improved and pupils now make good progress across key stage 2. However, the proportion of the most able pupils achieving above age-related expectations is not high enough.

Your insistence on daily high quality phonics and spelling lessons has paid dividends. Younger pupils quickly develop their early reading skills and older pupils are making sure that they apply their spelling knowledge to their writing. Pupils find their teachers' feedback helpful in improving their work. In a mathematics lesson, for example, pupils were able to explain their previous misconceptions when using long multiplication and show me the correct calculation method. Teachers make good use of opportunities across the curriculum for pupils to practise their writing. You acknowledge that the effective monitoring and evaluation of pupils' performance that takes place in English and mathematics are not yet developed across all subjects.

Second, the inspector asked your governing body to become more effectively involved in the strategic leadership and management of the school. There have been a number of changes in the membership of the governing body since the previous inspection. Governors recently completed an audit of skills to ensure that they have the experience and expertise to fulfil their responsibilities. They make good use of training and have sought guidance from the local authority adviser to check that they are carrying out their roles appropriately. Governors are well informed about all aspects of the school's performance and ask incisive questions to make sure that policies and improvement plans are being acted on.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. You make sure that statutory checks are carried out on the suitability of staff to work with children. It is clear that safeguarding is a high priority at your school. Staff know that however small and insignificant they think their concerns may be, they must report them. Staff training is up to date and you make sure that you discuss safeguarding as a matter of course at your weekly team meetings. Pupils pay heed to the messages you give them about how to stay safe. Pupils are adamant that bullying very rarely happens in their school and are confident that any issues would be swiftly resolved by their teachers. Staff, parents and pupils are unanimous in their view that pupils are safe and well cared for.

Inspection findings

- Everywhere you look in school, you see pupils with their 'heads in a book'. Pupils are delighted by the range and quality of books they can choose from, both in their class and school libraries. Pupils talk enthusiastically about their favourite authors and genres. The consistent approach to the teaching of reading across the school, daily small group reading sessions and investment in staff training have made reading a strength of the school.
- When you took up your post, you quite rightly focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning in English and mathematics. You have now turned your attention to other subjects. Staff worked together to devise a curriculum plan which makes sure that every pupil acquires the essential skills and knowledge they need, overcoming the challenges of mixed age and key stage classes. You recognise that you now need more consistent monitoring and evaluating of pupils' performance in foundation subjects.
- Pupils enjoy coming to school. They were excited to tell me about the things they have been learning about. Older pupils are fascinated by the lives of schoolchildren in India. They are particularly intrigued by the arrangements these children have for lunch. Pupils look forward to their science lessons. They appreciate the regular opportunities to carry out practical investigations. For example, pupils confidently explained to me how they had tested the density of different liquids.
- Staff make sure that pupils are well prepared for moving to a secondary school through the usual transition arrangements. However, you recognise that the move from your small village school to a large high school is daunting. Your focus on building up pupils' resilience, so that they learn to enjoy challenge and cope well with uncertainty and complexity, prepares them well for their next steps.
- Your pupils are polite and courteous. They take pride in their work, listen attentively to their teachers and show respect to their classmates. They are keen to live up to your expectations and place high value on your recognition of their achievements.
- Classrooms are calm and purposeful. Pupils use the wealth of hints and tips displayed on the walls to help them with their work. Pupils make good use of reference books to support their learning. Pupils are equally comfortable working independently or as part of a group. Pupils enjoy thinking about the insightful questions their teachers ask. These questions help pupils to consolidate their learning and deepen their understanding
- You offer a wealth of additional support for pupils, whatever their needs. For example, if teachers notice that a pupil has not grasped a key concept, they ensure that the pupil is given help so that they can keep up with their classmates. For your disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and pupils new to your school, this extra help makes a positive difference.

- Teachers make sure that pupils learn about the different lives, faiths and traditions of people who live in Britain today. During a recent assembly, pupils were struck by a group of refugees who talked to them about their experiences. Year 3 and 4 pupils debated about whether it was right for restaurants to open on Christmas Day, considering the rights of the employees as well as the reasons why some people may visit restaurants on this holiday.
- Despite an outbreak of norovirus this term, attendance has improved. You have ensured that the overwhelming majority of pupils have excellent attendance. You have given support to a few families who find it difficult to get their children to school on time every day. You have not shied away from taking robust action when required.
- You have made improvements to the provision for your youngest children. The proportion of children achieving a good level of development at the end of the Reception Year is now consistently above the national average. This means that children are ready for learning in Year 1. You and the governing body are determined to further improve the learning environment for the growing numbers of children in your Reception Year. Good progress has been made with your plans.
- Pupils in key stage 1 achieve well from their different starting points. By the end of Year 2, almost all pupils achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics. However, you and your staff recognise that across the school there is more to be done. We agree that more of your pupils are capable of exceeding expectations at the end of the early years, working at greater depth at the end of Year 2 and achieving high standards by the end of Year 6.
- Pupils who join your school midway through their primary schooling are made to feel welcome. These pupils talk about how quickly they have made friends. You ensure that you very quickly find out whether they have any gaps in their learning or need help to catch up with their classmates. For some of these pupils, the transformation in their confidence and self-assurance has been amazing.
- Although there was some information missing from your school's website, including the new required aspects of reporting on the pupil premium grant, you quickly ensured that this was rectified during my visit. The school's website now meets requirements.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the proportion of the most able pupils achieving above age-related expectations increases by the end of the early years and key stages 1 and 2.
- the school develops an approach to assessment for the foundation subjects so that leaders can ensure that pupils achieve well across all subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Pippa Jackson Maitland
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you as well as staff and members of the governing body. I also spoke to the local authority adviser who works with the school. I spoke with pupils during lessons and around the school. I met with a group of pupils and heard them read, and spoke to parents at the start of the school day. I took account of the information contained within responses to the online questionnaires for pupils, parents and staff, as well as the results of school's own recent survey of parents. I visited classrooms to observe pupils' learning and looked at their work in books. I reviewed information about pupils' progress, attainment, the curriculum and attendance. I scrutinised the school's self-evaluation and action plans and looked at safeguarding, including evaluating the impact of the school's procedures and policies to keep pupils safe, recruitment checks and record-keeping.

The areas focused on during the inspection included:

- the actions taken by the governing body to address weaknesses in their strategic leadership and management, identified during the previous inspection
- the use of additional funding for disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and physical education and sports
- the quality of the curriculum offered by the school
- the effectiveness of the school's procedures for keeping pupils safe
- the actions taken by school leaders to improve attendance.