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Mr Paul Cotter
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Dear Mr Cotter

Short inspection of The Cathedral School of St Mary

Following my visit to the school on 19 January 2017, 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 December 2009.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your head of learning lead the school with conviction and a sense of purpose. This is because you both know the school very well and are clear about its strengths and what needs to improve. It is also because you have an informed understanding of the culturally diverse community the school serves. The school's values and ethos resonate strongly because you have fostered a culture that celebrates pupils' different religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Leaders and staff have high expectations of pupils, regardless of their circumstances or the difficulties they may face. Barriers to achievement are there to be overcome and staff do not accept that any child's circumstances should prevent them from achieving all of which they are capable. Staff believe in the school's mission to improve children's lives through education. They are committed to providing pupils with the skills and knowledge they need to get on in life and build a positive, hopeful future. As your head of learning commented to me, 'the children are the strength of the school.'

Governors are ambitious for staff and pupils. They, like you, are not content to rest on their laurels. Pupils at the school have consistently achieved well over time but governors drive leaders to aim for even greater heights. They too are aware of what needs improving in the school and hold leaders to account to ensure that issues are dealt with swiftly and effectively. You welcome challenge from governors and have

provided training for them about how to ask pertinent questions of senior leaders. Governors bring a range of expertise and experience to the governing body, which has strengthened its capacity to hold leaders to account.

Strong leadership has maintained the quality of teaching so that achievement throughout the school has been consistently strong over time, in different subjects. Teachers provide work that challenges pupils of different abilities. Pupils are prompted to reflect on their work and to identify mistakes. They are encouraged to consider how work could be improved and given opportunities to re-draft. In this way, pupils, including the many pupils who are disadvantaged, make strong progress in different subjects.

Pupils engage well with their learning because they find the work stimulating and interesting. As a result, their behaviour is good. They follow instructions, pay avid attention to the teacher and work well with each other. Pupils are curious and ask questions to find out more. In many classes, a 'buzz' of learning is apparent as pupils actively, but calmly, set about their work with enthusiasm. One pupil I spoke to said, 'I like learning more things.'

At the beginning of the inspection, we agreed on the key lines of enquiry to be considered during the day. These included establishing the effectiveness of actions taken to ensure that pupils achieve highly in all their subjects at key stage 2. We also considered the extent to which leaders have maintained the high level of pastoral care recognised in the last inspection and the effectiveness of actions to reduce absence. We also considered whether safeguarding is effective. These lines of enquiry are considered below under 'Safeguarding' and 'Inspection findings'.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have a firm grasp of all safeguarding and child protection matters. They ensure that all staff are vigilant and appropriately trained to keep children safe. Pupils are well known to designated officers and the wider staff. This means that staff are alert to any changes in pupils' behaviour or presentation that may trigger concerns. Leaders prompt staff to share any concerns they have, however small they may appear to be, and in relation to any issue. As a result, communication is strong and information is passed to those who need it. This allows detailed, well-ordered and chronologically accurate records to be kept. Consequently, leaders are able to monitor ongoing cases closely and act in the most suitable way to resolve issues.

A productive partnership with external agencies assists leaders in satisfactorily resolving cases. Leaders also work closely with parents to prevent issues from escalating and to build up trust between home and school. For example, leaders are clear that language difficulties cannot be a barrier to communication when a child's welfare is at stake. Consequently, they are persistent in overcoming barriers such as these to ensure that they act in the child's best interest.

Checks are in place to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children. Leaders are working with representatives from the multi-academy trust, of which the school is a part, to ensure that safeguarding checks are sufficiently robust and meet current, more rigorous expectations.

Pupils report that they are safe. They feel happy and comfortable in school because they feel well supported. Should they have any concerns, there are numerous members of staff they would be willing to approach to pass these on. As one pupil I spoke to said, 'the teachers really care about you.'

Inspection findings

- Pupils leaving the school have made progress in reading, writing and mathematics that has been consistently in line with average, or better, for the last few years. In 2016, in writing, pupils' progress and attainment overall, and for middle ability pupils, were higher than average and in the top 10% of schools.
- Current pupils in the school, including the many who are disadvantaged, are making strong progress across most year groups. This is because they are set challenging, interesting work that meets their needs. The most able pupils are stretched in mathematics, for example, because they are set more taxing problems than other members of the class. Lower ability pupils are set problems that, although challenging, are made more accessible and better suit their needs.
- Leaders have identified that some pupils in lower key stage 2 are not making the progress of which they are capable. Leaders are taking action to address this through the redeployment of staff, reorganisation of classes and monitoring of the quality of teaching.
- The curriculum does not provide pupils with sufficient opportunities to acquire skills and knowledge across the full range of subjects, such as modern foreign languages. Where possible, leaders take advantage of opportunities to teach in cross-curricular ways. For example, pupils produce art work during their religious education lessons. However, you acknowledge that more could be done to broaden the curriculum further. You are aware of the issue and have already taken action to some extent. Consequently, pupils now participate more often in sporting and musical activities.
- Attendance overall and for nearly all groups of pupils is improving. Overall attendance is currently above average. Persistent absence has also fallen significantly since last year. This is because leaders have relentlessly focused upon the improvement of attendance, particularly for those pupils who have high levels of absence. Leaders work closely with the parent support adviser and the education welfare officer to overcome cultural barriers and build strong relationships with families. Leaders have introduced before- and after-school clubs to help families, which have had a positive impact on attendance.

- Pupils are looked after well by school staff who 'go the extra mile' for the pupils. This is because they share the philosophy held by leaders that staff in the school are there to support development of the 'whole' child. In spite of deprivation, disadvantage or communication difficulties when they enter school, pupils thrive as a result of the work of staff.
- Additional funding is used effectively to ensure that all pupils, including many who speak English as an additional language, make progress in their various subjects.
- Pupils are well prepared for life's future challenges because of their rich primary school experience. They achieve well by the time they leave school, but have also acquired a number of other life skills as well. For example, they know how to swim, how to ride a bike and how to eat healthily. A number of extra-curricular clubs are available to pupils during their time in school, including those for choir, netball, 'Mini-Vinnies' (a charity group), chess, salsa and running.
- Nearly all parents who responded to the Parent View online survey would recommend the school. They agreed that their child was happy, safe and well taught and made good progress.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- further opportunities to broaden the curriculum are created to provide pupils with skills and knowledge across the full range of subjects, including modern foreign languages
- action continues to be taken to ensure that pupils in lower key stage 2 make the progress of which they are capable.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I spoke to you and your head of learning, pupils, representatives of the governing body and the area adviser.

You, your head of learning and I made visits to lessons to observe pupils' attitudes to learning. The work in pupils' books was also scrutinised.

A range of documentary evidence was considered, which included the school's self-evaluation, the school improvement plan, current progress information and attendance information. I also considered staff safeguarding referrals, child protection records and risk assessments.

In addition, I took account of 11 responses to the Parent View online survey, 13 responses to the staff survey and one response to the pupil survey issued during the inspection.