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Mrs Sarah Murphy
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Murphy

Short inspection of St Michael with St John CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 2 February 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 the school was judged to be good in September 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection, and has successfully ensured that St Michael with St John is continuing to improve. You and your fellow leaders, including governors, know the school very well and have a clear, shared ambition for the school to be as good as it can be. You effectively use your knowledge of the school, and detailed tracking of pupils' attainment and progress, to build on existing strengths and tackle any weaker areas of provision. As a result, standards have risen since the previous inspection.

Pupils demonstrate extremely positive attitudes to learning in their lessons, and around school and on the playground their conduct is consistently good. They clearly enjoy school and speak enthusiastically about their favourite subjects and about the trips that they have been on which have enhanced their learning. Pupils speak very highly of the staff in school, who they say 'care about us a lot'. Relationships between staff and pupils are warm and based on mutual respect.

A key area for improvement identified in the previous inspection report was to challenge the most able pupils more effectively. Teachers now use information about pupils' previous learning well, planning interesting activities that develop pupils' mathematical skills and knowledge and then challenge them to apply these skills to solve different problems. Pupils are taught to use increasingly complex grammar in their writing and are then provided with a wide range of opportunities to practise and refine their skills through writing in different subjects. Results over

time, and evidence in the work of current pupils, both confirm that an increasing proportion of pupils are working above the expected standard for their age in writing and mathematics.

In reading, results in the 2016 key stage 1 and 2 assessments showed that there is still more to be done to secure the very best outcomes for the most able pupils. Pupils read confidently, and younger pupils use their phonics knowledge well to decode unfamiliar words. However, pupils are less confident when asked to infer meaning from text or explain their ideas and thoughts, while many pupils also struggle to understand more complex or unusual vocabulary. Leaders are aware of this and have already introduced new materials and a more focused approach to teaching reading comprehension. Early signs are that this is beginning to have the desired effect.

One of the key lines of enquiry for this inspection was to consider how successfully provision in the early years was meeting the needs of all learners. This is an area that leaders had already identified as needing further improvement. Positive steps have been made since the last inspection, and the proportion of children reaching a good level of development has increased over the past three years. There are still differences in the achievement of boys and girls within the early years, and in 2016 almost double the number of girls reached the good level of development as boys. This is because the provision in the early years does not cater equally effectively for all of children's different learning needs. Files that record individual children's achievements contain a wealth of evidence, but a high proportion of this is drawn from indoor activities directed by staff while far less reflects learning outdoors or that children have selected themselves. The school has sought additional advice to help it address this imbalance and plans are also in place to significantly remodel the learning environment.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of a high quality. Thorough checks are made on staff, governors, volunteers and regular visitors to the school to make sure that they are suitable people to work with children. Leaders have also ensured that training for staff and governors is up to date.

The culture within the school is one of vigilance. One member of staff summed up the school's approach very well in saying that 'safeguarding is everybody's concern'. Staff clearly understand the procedures to follow if they are worried about a pupil's welfare. Any such concerns are followed up rigorously to ensure that pupils remain safe. The school works particularly closely with the attendance service as it is attempting to improve on historically low attendance levels. This work is having an impact, and attendance is steadily improving while rates of persistent absence are declining, although there is still room for further improvement.

Governors have played their part in ensuring that St Michael with St John provides pupils with a safe environment by making sure that the site is secure. Pupils know

that external doors can only be opened with an electronic fob and they say that this makes them feel safe in school because nobody can get inside who isn't allowed to. Pupils are also knowledgeable about ways to stay safe when using the internet and say that they learned a lot during the school's 'e-safety week'.

Inspection findings

- A key line of enquiry for this inspection was to consider how effectively reading is being taught across the school. Reading provision is highly organised and well resourced. Pupils have access to an attractive central library area and say that they enjoy using the book areas in each of their classes. Phonics is taught effectively to the younger pupils, and in 2016 an above-average proportion of pupils reached the expected standard in the phonics check in Years 1 and 2. Teachers build effectively on this good start and pupils develop good reading comprehension skills. The proportion of pupils across the school reading at the appropriate level for their age is increasing, but too few have developed the higher-order reading skills and wide vocabulary needed to reach the highest levels.
- St Michael with St John provides pupils and their families with a supportive and nurturing environment, which has been further enhanced this year by the appointment of a pastoral support officer. The increasing number of pupils who join the school at different points throughout the year settle in quickly because they are well supported. Similarly, those who are at an early stage of learning English progress well from their starting points.
- You have made sure that pupils benefit from a broad, balanced and engaging curriculum. Work in history is particularly strong, and pupils show a good knowledge of historical periods, including life in Ancient Greece and Viking Britain, and events such as the Great Fire of London. Teachers plan creatively and so learning in history is regularly enhanced with different writing and art activities.
- Pupils have a strong sense of fairness and equality, and explain clearly the importance of respecting people's differences and treating everyone equally. This sense of fairness was very well displayed in work that pupils had completed on the theme of 'Justice and Poverty', for which pupils in Year 6 had produced some mature and thought-provoking written work. Pupils have also produced some thoughtful work on the theme of 'What does it mean to be British?' as part of the school's effective work to promote British values.
- A key strength of St Michael with St John is the quality of leadership shown by you and other leaders across the school. It is apparent that all of the senior and middle leaders in school share the same high aspirations for the school, and are aware of the role they each have to play in continuing to move the school forward. Checks on the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning are thorough, and improvement plans plot a clear path ahead. Staff are overwhelmingly supportive and say that they feel valued and appreciated.
- Governance of the school is effective. Governors have a clear and accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and provide school leaders with an

appropriate balance of support and challenge. They ensure that the school's budget, including additional funding such as for the pupil premium, is used effectively to improve and enhance pupils' educational experience.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the rate of pupils' progress in reading is accelerated, particularly for the most able pupils, by developing their skills of inference and deduction and expanding their vocabulary
- provision in the early years, both indoors and outdoors, more fully meets the differing needs of all groups of learners
- rates of attendance continue to improve so that they are at least in line with the national average.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Dixon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short inspection I met with you, the deputy headteacher and the leader responsible for English. I also met a group of teaching and support staff, four members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I considered the seven responses from parents to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and spoke to parents at the start of the school day and by telephone. The nine responses to the staff survey and one response to the pupil survey were also considered. I met with a group of pupils and heard a number of other pupils read. We made joint visits to a range of classes to observe teaching and learning in a number of subjects, and I also looked at pupils' work. I also looked at a range of documentation covering different aspects of the school's work.