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23 February 2017

Mrs Paula Fearn
Headteacher
St Mary's Catholic First School, Dorchester
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Dear Mrs Fearn

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic First School, Dorchester

Following my visit to the school on 25 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 July 2010.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You are committed to providing pupils with the best education. As such, you have high expectations of both staff and pupils. You have successfully persuaded the school community to aim high in the belief that pupils are entitled to the best.

You take a clear, objective view of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. This has enabled you to take prompt action to tackle the most urgent issues first and you have worked effectively with staff to implement necessary changes. You understand the importance of building leadership capacity throughout the school. As a result, the assistant headteacher and subject leaders feel they have ownership of their work and take responsibility for it. Consequently, leadership is strengthening throughout the school and improving the quality of teaching and learning. Staff enjoy their work, work well together and share leaders' values. They contribute to a dynamic, purposeful school culture.

Leadership is further strengthened by the governing body, which is effective at holding leaders to account. Governors are clear about their roles and benefit from a constructive relationship with leaders. You welcome challenge and encourage governors to ask the key questions that focus on pupils' achievement. As a result, this relationship promotes transparency, openness and objectivity. Governors are well informed and know the school well.

The area adviser bolsters the external challenge provided to leaders. He, too, knows the school well because he visits frequently to assess the quality of teaching and learning. These visits support leaders in identifying and tackling aspects of teaching practice which need to improve. Additionally, the adviser provides leaders and governors with training and expertise in areas such as safeguarding and performance management.

Following a period of unsettled staffing, leaders have acted decisively to ensure that staff are deployed where they have most impact on raising pupils' achievement. This has shored up the quality of teaching so that pupils across year groups are making strong progress. Teachers use their good subject knowledge and understanding of pupils' needs to plan activities that interest them. Consequently, pupils enjoy their learning. They willingly participate in activities, ask questions and work hard. For example, vibrant, colourful learning displays on classroom walls 'beckon' pupils over to attempt a learning challenge. On one Year 2 display, the number 75 was written in the middle of the board. It was surrounded by a number of questions to develop pupils' mathematical skills. Questions included, 'Can you find half this number?' and 'What is a hundred times this number?' Pupils were keen to attempt these challenges.

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 improve achievement in writing and mathematics at key stage 1. We also considered the effectiveness of actions to improve achievement in the early years and reduce absence. Furthermore, we considered whether safeguarding is effective. These lines of enquiry are considered below under 'Safeguarding' and 'Inspection findings'.

Safeguarding is effective.

Staff have nurtured an open culture in which pupils feel able to share any concerns or anxieties they may have. This is because pupils enjoy strong, trusting relationships with staff. Pupils report that they feel safe. When I asked them what makes them feel safe, one pupil replied, 'We've got the safeguarding team'. There is little bullying in school. Pupils report that, when it does occur, staff take it very seriously and successfully resolve matters.

Staff have received appropriate child protection training. They know the procedures to follow and who to talk to if they have any concerns about a child. Records are well kept so that designated staff are able to share information effectively and keep a careful track of ongoing cases. Checks to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children are also robust and well maintained.

Inspection findings

- Until 2016, pupils' attainment at the end of key stage 1 in reading, writing and mathematics was consistently in line with the national average, or better, in all core subjects. In 2016, pupils' attainment in writing and mathematics fell below

average. Leaders were quick to identify reasons for this. They have taken action to ensure that underperforming pupils catch up. This includes redeploying staff so that pupils who need to catch up in certain classes do so at a faster rate. Additionally, work has taken place to ensure that staff have a more secure understanding of assessment and provide greater challenge to pupils.

- Current information indicates that most pupils are making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics in different year groups. Information shows that pupils currently in Year 2 are on track to attain in line with the national average or higher in the key stage 1 assessments this year. However, leaders acknowledge that some pupils who should be achieving at greater depth are not yet doing so in writing and mathematics.
- Pupils are now being provided with more opportunities to write at length and in different subjects. Raising pupils' achievement in writing is a key part of the school's development plan. Both leaders and governors are monitoring pupils' progress closely to ensure that a higher number of pupils achieve at greater depth.
- Reading continues to be a strength in the school. Pupils' attainment has been higher than the national average over time. Work in pupils' books shows that they make strong progress as they move up through the school.
- Pupils of different abilities are being provided with more challenging work in mathematics. Teachers are placing a greater emphasis on developing pupils' reasoning skills. The most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, respond well to this extra challenge. This approach helps them to clarify their thinking and allows the teacher to challenge any misconceptions. For example, in answer to a question in an exercise book, 'Why did you put a zero here?' a Year 4 pupil replied, 'Because of the place value. Because the 2 is worth 20.'
- The support provided by other adults helps those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities to make good progress in mathematics. For example, pupils in Year 1 were better at remembering certain numbers because the teaching assistant had devised stories and characters around them.
- Until 2016, the number of pupils achieving a good level of development at the end of the Reception Year was consistently above the national average. In 2016, this number fell below average. Leaders know the reasons for this group's underperformance and have put in place support to ensure that that these children catch up. The assistant headteacher now leads the early years foundation stage and teaches in Reception. She has been quick to make assessment practices more robust, plan activities that spark children's interest and establish strong relationships with parents. The learning environment is bright, colourful and dynamic. It acts as an additional resource to assist learning and celebrate children's work.
- Overall attendance has improved this year and now stands at 96.7%. This is higher than last year when overall attendance was below average. It has also improved for certain groups of pupils, such as those who are disadvantaged. Staff work closely, and proactively, with external agencies and the local cluster of schools to improve attendance for a small number of persistent absentees.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- action continues to be taken, as a result of regular, effective monitoring, to support pupils in different year groups to work at greater depth and make the progress they are capable of in writing and mathematics.

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 Dorset. 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, the assistant headteacher and a middle leader. I also spoke to pupils, representatives of the governing body and the area adviser.

You 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, information about the suitability of staff to work with children and child protection records.

In addition, I took account of 43 responses to the Parent View online survey.