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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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Mrs Jan Holmes
Headteacher
St James' Church of England Primary School
Lyme Street
Haydock
St Helens
Merseyside
WA11 0NL

Dear Mrs Holmes

Short inspection of St James' Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 21 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 February 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Since your appointment in 2015, you have very quickly and accurately evaluated the quality of education that the school provides. You have a secure understanding of the strengths of the school and those areas that require further development. Governors rightly have every confidence in your work because, under your guidance, they have appointed new leaders who know how to make a positive difference to teaching and learning. There are clear examples of how you have already addressed some underperformance in reading and pupils across the school now make good progress. This is because the action plans that you create are sharp, focused and timely. Added to this, you are not afraid to take difficult decisions to ensure that the school continues to improve. Without doubt, the standards that pupils achieve continue to be good and the progress that disadvantaged pupils make is very good across the range of subjects they study.

To achieve these improvements, staff and parents clearly understand your mission and vision. During the inspection, parents spoke of how you have 'turned the school around' and that it is now 'a happy place to learn'. This is because you are adamant that St James' Church of England Primary School must be a fully inclusive learning community where all staff know and value every individual so that they can succeed. Your strong belief that each pupil must be nurtured shines through. The

Christian ethos is at the heart of the school. Displays around the corridors and in classrooms help pupils to understand the importance of friendship, peace and forgiveness. Your mission to 'learn, laugh and live with the love of God' underpins all of your work.

One way in which the importance of friendship, peace and forgiveness can be seen is through your actions to improve behaviour. During the inspection, a small minority of parents were concerned about bullying and the behaviour of pupils over the past few years. When you took up your post as headteacher, you recognised that behaviour was not as good as it should be and that there was a small amount of bullying in the school. You have successfully addressed this by revising your behaviour policy and by ensuring that staff impose appropriate sanctions on any pupils who do not meet your very high standards. It is clear that your work to improve this is now paying dividends because pupils feel safe and they say behaviour is good. During the inspection, pupils were courteous towards one another and they collaborated well. Indeed, relationships are a strength. However, you accept that where learning is not yet challenging enough, a very small minority of pupils can engage in low-level disruption. You will not tolerate this.

To promote strong behaviour for learning you have rightly found inspirational ways to foster a love of learning in pupils. All around the school are striking examples of the high-quality work that pupils produce and displays are a real celebration of pupils' achievements. The learning environment is both lively and vibrant. It is clear that you and your staff have extremely high aspirations for each pupil. The St James' University, for example, is a well-attended after-school provision which supports pupils' academic and social development. Your pupils talk passionately about this initiative. They also appreciate the breakfast booster sessions which help them to keep up and catch up.

One clear example of how you have helped pupils to catch up is in their writing. At the last inspection, leaders were asked to raise pupils' attainment in writing by the end of key stage 2. You have successfully achieved this. Outcomes in writing are now very good overall and, notably, disadvantaged pupils make strong progress in their writing. You continue to sharpen your systems for monitoring the quality of writing across the school and the information you have is used effectively to drive further improvements. In addition, you recognise the ongoing need to inspire pupils to write with precision and you rightly use the wider curriculum to do this. Pupils very much enjoy the curriculum that you offer and they say that your teachers help them to know what to do to improve. You achieve this because you set clear targets for all pupils so that they know and understand the next stage in their learning.

As well as writing, at the last inspection you were asked to improve pupils' handwriting, punctuation and spelling. This has also been achieved. Pupils' work shows that handwriting is securely good because it is well developed from the early years through to key stage 2. You ensure that there are high expectations of the standard of handwriting that is acceptable. Teachers and pupils understand this. Every day, pupils engage in daily handwriting practice. Spelling and punctuation have also improved significantly. There is dedicated time to teach spelling,

punctuation and grammar and staff provide timely intervention if pupils fall behind, for example by revisiting phonics. Now, pupils achieve similar standards in spelling, punctuation and grammar to other pupils nationally.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is a key strength of your work and pastoral support is strong. The leadership team ensures that all safeguarding arrangements are appropriate and records are detailed and of high quality. You ensure that staff training is regular and that all policies and procedures are up to date. You, and your governors, regularly review the site to ensure that it remains safe. Following this review, you evaluate the quality and robustness of your risk assessments. Your work to ensure that vulnerable pupils are safe is also excellent. You routinely track the attendance of potentially vulnerable pupils with even more rigour to ensure that they are not at risk. Your work to teach pupils about online safety weaves throughout the curriculum and is supplemented with themed learning days.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, I initially looked at why standards in reading declined in 2016 at the end of key stage 2. It is clear that you and your team have already taken effective action to arrest this decline. Together with your assistant headteacher, you have evaluated the teaching of reading across the curriculum and you have implemented excellent improvement plans which are already improving provision. Guided reading sessions have been restructured to ensure that teachers plan sessions that meet pupils' needs. There is now suitable challenge for the most able pupils to develop their reading skills. Teachers also give pupils plentiful opportunities to decode unfamiliar texts and they clearly record pupils' progress in their reading journals. You have also addressed the quality of pupils' homework and pupils now have to read frequently at home and undertake a range of comprehension activities. Rightly, you recognise the need to continue to embed this good work.
- The second focus of the inspection was concerned with the actions that leaders have taken to improve mathematics at the end of key stage 1, so that more pupils achieve the expected standard. Again, you had already recognised this as an area for improvement. You know that teachers need to plan more opportunities for pupils to develop their problem-solving and reasoning skills. For this reason, staff, including teaching assistants, have undertaken additional training to ensure that pupils' learning and progress in mathematics in key stage 1 improves. Work scrutiny shows that pupils are now making good progress in Years 1 and 2 in mathematics. Your assessment system also allows teachers to recognise where pupils need additional support and intervention. This is timely and helps pupils to understand misconceptions. You do recognise, however, that some pupils can achieve more. For example, during mathematics lessons that we jointly observed some pupils finished their work quickly because it was too easy and the challenge activity that they moved on to did not appropriately extend their learning. You have a clear strategy to address this. It is worth noting that pupils catch up and achieve well in mathematics by the end of key stage 2.

- The third area of focus for this inspection was about leaders' work to maintain and improve further the proportion of children who achieve a good level of development by the end of the early years foundation stage. Leadership in the early years is excellent and children's development is very good. This is because you ensure that teaching is highly effective in meeting children's individual needs. You also focus on transition arrangements from Nursery to Reception which are excellent because leaders have a very good understanding of children's prior learning and development. There is a strong focus on developing relationships between children, and teachers foster curiosity and inquisitiveness at every opportunity. The proportion of children expected to achieve a good level of development this year is close to 80%. This is above the national average.
- The final area of focus for this inspection was concerned with attendance. Pupils' attendance in 2016 was slightly below the national average and the proportion of pupils who were persistently absent from school was higher than average. You recognise that this is an ongoing area for improvement and you explore every option to improve pupils' attendance. It is clear that you make attendance everyone's priority and good attendance is rewarded frequently. All around the school there is evidence of your work to ensure excellent attendance, for example each class has an attendance barometer outside its classroom. Parents are made aware of the importance of good attendance through the website, newsletters and, in some cases, through home visits by the education welfare officer. You also make use of fixed-penalty notices to fine parents when necessary. The result of your actions is clear in this year's attendance figures which are now broadly in line with the national average. The proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school is now much lower.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers continue to improve the progress made by pupils in reading across the school by developing further pupils' comprehension and decoding skills
- teachers plan work that consistently challenges pupils to excel, especially in mathematics
- they eradicate the low-level disruption evident in a small minority of lessons so that pupils' progress in their learning is maximised.

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

Yours sincerely

Jonathan Smart
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, your assistant headteacher, parents of pupils from the school, your early years leader, middle leaders and members of the governing body. Also, I held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. In addition, I met formally with a group of pupils from across the school and talked informally with others around the school and in lessons. I listened to pupils read. Furthermore, I observed teaching and learning in key stages 1 and 2 and visited the early years. I examined a range of documentation, including that relating to safeguarding, attendance information, pupils' assessment information, a range of policies, your evaluation of how well the school is performing and your school improvement plan. I also undertook a review of the school's website. As part of the inspection, I considered 19 responses to Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire and five responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.