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20 March 2017

Mrs Tracey Jones
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Dear Mrs Jones

Short inspection of Mary Dean's CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 8 March 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 January 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Attainment remains high by the end of key stage 2 and pupils achieve well. This includes disadvantaged pupils, who benefit from good-quality teaching and a challenging curriculum. Pupils are very well prepared for the demands of a secondary school curriculum by the time they leave school. Those pupils who need extra help to catch up, including pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, also make good progress. The recommendations made at the previous inspection have been tackled effectively. This includes improvements to the way information and communication technology is used to support learning.

Despite these strengths, you have also maintained a keen focus on areas needing further improvement. You and your governors are ambitious for the school and determined that it should be the best it can be. For example, you rightly recognise that more children in the early years should be reaching at least a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year. You are equally determined to improve attainment in key stage 1, particularly in writing. You have also identified that the impact of phonics teaching could be further strengthened. Leaders have not shied away from taking important action where improvements in teaching were needed.

You have also embarked on a programme of significant improvement of the mathematics curriculum throughout the school. This far-reaching and ambitious development has been backed up by improvements to the way that leaders undertake checks on teaching quality. This process is now more in-depth than in the past and takes account of pupils' progress over time. Crucially, it is focused on the quality of teaching and its impact on learning and how both can be improved. These changes are all having a positive impact on pupils' experience and confidence in mathematics – many remarked that it is their 'favourite subject'!

During this short inspection, in discussion with you, I focused on a small number of key aspects of the school's work. Firstly, we decided to evaluate the impact of actions to improve teaching and outcomes in the early years and key stage 1. Secondly, we agreed to look at how well leaders were improving the curriculum, particularly in mathematics. Lastly, we decided to consider the impact of the governing body in supporting and challenging the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

This is a safe school where pupils are looked after and cared for by staff. Pupils play and work happily together and appreciate the support of older pupils as 'playground buddies' who help them to make friends and to resolve any disputes. Bullying is rare, and pupils say that adults usually sort out any problems well. You and your governors are well aware of the challenges posed by the size, layout and condition of the school buildings. Governors have ensured that issues of health and safety and site management are therefore given due prominence. Pupils are sensible and well behaved as they move around the school.

Pupils enjoy coming to school and working with their teachers. Attendance is in line with the national average for primary schools and you work hard to support the small number of children and families where there may be concerns over absence. You are rigorous and tenacious in identifying and referring any concerns about children's welfare and safety. You work closely with other agencies to make sure that children receive the support they need. Record-keeping is of good quality, including for children in the care of the local authority.

Inspection findings

- Leadership of the early years is much improved. Expectations are higher and there is a more rigorous approach to teaching and the curriculum. Assessment is being used more effectively to pinpoint the next steps in children's learning. Crucially, you have ensured that practice and expectations are shared more effectively between the Nursery and Reception classes. As a result, attainment is rising in the early years, and a greater proportion of children are now on track to reach a good level of development than in the past.
- You have also placed a stronger emphasis on literacy and numeracy in the Reception Year. This has included introducing separate notebooks for children's work in these subjects, alongside their 'learning journals'. Their mathematics books, for example, show how teaching in the early years has embraced

approaches to teaching and the curriculum which have been developed further up the school. Children are developing a good understanding of shape and space, charts and diagrams, and numbers, and in using comparative language (such as 'smaller than'). You believe this is also helping children to prepare for the raised expectations of the curriculum in key stage 1.

- Teaching is also improving in key stage 1, including in phonics. Your checks on teaching had identified some weaknesses in the teaching of phonics. For example, some pupils lack confidence in using phonics, sometimes confusing letter sounds and names. However, through support and training, staff now have the skills and knowledge they need to teach phonics more effectively. Pupils also enjoy the opportunity to support younger children with their reading through your 'buddy readers' initiative.
- You rightly recognise that, in the past, standards at the end of key stage 1 had not been high enough. As a result, you have taken action to improve teaching and raise expectations. In particular, you have focused on improving writing, especially boys' writing. An emphasis on 'talk for writing' has been effective in helping pupils develop their ideas and to improve their confidence and attitudes to writing.
- The curriculum and teaching in mathematics has been a major focus of the school's work during this academic year. It is clear this emphasis is bearing fruit. Pupils are gaining confidence in thinking, reasoning and problem solving in mathematics. Their work shows that they are used to developing their own strategies and using calculations, diagrams and jottings to solve problems. The most able pupils are given work which challenges them to think even more deeply about the mathematics they are learning.
- From the beginning of this academic year, you introduced mixed-age classes throughout the school. This was a bold step. However, it is clear that there have been a number of positive benefits from this arrangement, including greater opportunities for collaboration between staff and increased levels of accountability for pupils' achievement. Comments from parents during the inspection also indicated that many welcomed this arrangement. You recognise that it will be very important to keep this initiative under review, particularly to identify any unintended consequences of this approach.
- Governors are very supportive of the school and are ambitious for its future success. They are diligent and hard-working, and are committed to strengthening their own skills, knowledge and understanding. Governors scrutinise closely many aspects of the school's work, particularly matters relating to safety, safeguarding and pupils' welfare. Through their commitment to high levels of transparency, governors have made available a wealth of information about their work on the school's website. They consider carefully the impact of their work on improving the school.
- Leaders and governors work closely together to consider the school's future direction and priorities for improvement. These are set out in policies and plans. However, improvement priorities are not always linked sharply enough to impact measures or interim checkpoints. Plans do not make clear the difference actions are intended to make (targets), suitable timescales or how progress will be

assessed. Similarly, leaders and governors do not use the evidence they gather rigorously enough to evaluate the impact of the school's work. This weakens leaders' and governors' ability to understand whether improvements are happening quickly or securely enough.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should:

- further raise attainment in the early years and key stage 1 by embedding recent improvements to teaching, assessment and the curriculum
- improve the rigour of school development planning and self-evaluation by ensuring that improvement priorities are linked to clear targets, checkpoints and impact measures.

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

Yours sincerely

Lee Northern
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I held discussions with you and with staff at the school. I looked at your school improvement planning, records of the checks on teaching and your school self-evaluation summary. I scrutinised safeguarding records and incident logs and we discussed a wide range of matters related to pupils' safety, well-being and welfare. Together, we visited classes where we also looked at examples of pupils' work. I met with four governors, scrutinised recent minutes of meetings of the governing body and looked at governors' self-review documents. I also held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. I met informally with pupils at different times during the inspection, including in lessons and at lunchtime. I considered parents' responses to the online questionnaire, 'Parent View', and spoke with a small number of parents at the start of the school day. I also scrutinised the responses to the online surveys of staff and pupils' views.