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Mrs Alison Rafferty
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Rafferty

Short inspection of St Michael's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School, St Albans

Following my visit to the school on 28 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 March 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection and continues to bring about further improvement. I was impressed by the environment for learning that staff create in both of your buildings. A sense of order and the celebration of pupils' achievements and work are immediately apparent.

Since the previous inspection, there have been several leadership changes which have resulted in some degree of turbulence. Nevertheless, since you started full time in your position as headteacher in September 2015, you have established a calm and purposeful environment where pupils' well-being and readiness to learn are central to your work. Consequently, pupils understand the ethos and values you promote. They are enthusiastic for learning and clearly demonstrate your vision of 'we believe we can achieve'.

The school's well-led governing body provides challenge and support in equal measure. Governors share your deeply held ambition for the personal and academic success of each pupil. Governors are regular visitors to the school. They use information gathered on these visits to challenge or commend leaders on the quality of education provided. They provide strategic direction and continue to develop and sustain school growth. Currently, your plans to expand to a one-form entry school together with additional building works are well under way.

One aspect of your strong leadership is how well you deal with potential obstacles to success. Having a school split across two sites presents challenges for the organisation of the school day. You have ensured that both sites have the same sense of purpose and pupils receive the same high-quality experience. The younger pupils in the lower school are settled and demonstrate an infectious excitement for their learning. Adults ensure that pupils are safe and take every opportunity to develop their learning further. For example, adults use the walk back to the lower school, after lunch, creatively to consolidate pupils' learning through either singing rhymes or practising numbers. Consequently, no learning time is missed.

You correctly judge the early years provision to be a strength of the school. Strong, effective leadership in the early years has ensured that children have an exceptionally good start to their learning at St Michael's Primary. The proportion of children making a good level of development is consistently greater than that found nationally. Staff ensure that expectations are high, routines clear and tasks carefully matched to children's needs and interests. The proportion of children exceeding the typical expectations is increasing. This is because teachers provide them with exciting opportunities to extend their learning so they go beyond the stage that is expected for their age. Pupils are very well prepared for Year 1.

Pupils are proud of their school, respectful and contribute well to the harmonious ethos that is so evident. Those I spoke with confidently and willingly shared their work and explained their learning. Pupils spoke maturely about their understanding of friendships and how well staff help them understand the distressing impact of bullying, which they say rarely happens. The older pupils particularly enjoy the summer months when they can use the Paddock as a welcome extension to their playground. You do all you can to ensure that the pupils play outdoors and use the limited playground space as well as possible.

Most parents are happy with the school. Many parents who provided responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, commented positively. For example, one parent commented that 'we are very fortunate that our children are able to attend this school', while another stated, 'my children are extremely happy at this school and are making excellent progress'. You provide exceptionally well for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural education.

You recognise that there are still areas to improve, particularly for the older pupils. Your work in raising pupils' achievement in mathematics and the impact of additional staff training is proving successful. Pupils are engaged in their lessons and the younger pupils relish the many opportunities they have to grapple with numerical problems. You and your deputy headteacher continue to focus on the improvements required so that more pupils excel in mathematics by the end of key stage 2.

Safeguarding is effective.

As school leaders, you place the highest priority on keeping pupils safe and providing strong pastoral care for them. You have been successful in creating a safe and caring environment in which pupils and staff have confidence in their work and feel valued. One member of staff commented through their questionnaire, 'I feel my skills and views are valued.' Nearly all pupils who responded to their questionnaire agreed that they feel safe and have a trusted adult to talk to in school if they are concerned.

All parents who responded to Parent View agreed that their children are safe and well cared for. One comment made by a parent typified the many positive statements received: 'The teaching and support staff seem to genuinely care about the welfare of the pupils.'

You have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Meticulous records are organised consistently and effectively. The governors regularly check that safeguarding and child protection practice in school is robust and rigorous. They ensure that the website is up to date and complies with statutory guidance.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, I considered the progress that pupils make in mathematics. This is because this was a subject where pupils attained less well than others nationally in 2016. Due to the small numbers in each year group, a degree of caution is required when considering the percentages as each pupil is worth a large proportion of the total.
- You have wasted no time in tackling pupils' lower progress and achievement in mathematics. It was clear to see the positive impact of both the staff training and your rigorous and systematic monitoring. Pupils are making good progress over time. Together we considered the progress of pupils who are most able, those who are disadvantaged and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities both in lessons and in the work in their exercise books. We found that pupils complete interesting activities that meet their needs well. All ability groups had opportunities to complete challenges so they could demonstrate their full understanding of a topic. In the lower school, pupils eagerly explained their methods and used additional practical resources effectively. Through the daily mathematics meetings, older pupils practise their numerical reasoning skills and use technical vocabulary to good effect. You recognise the need to continue to improve the provision for older pupils, some of whom still need to catch up so they reach the required standard by the end of key stage 2.

- Another area I considered was the quality of grammar, punctuation and spelling. In your school improvement plan, you had already identified raising the expectations and quality of pupils' handwriting, grammar and spelling as priorities. Work seen in pupils' books demonstrates that this is being successfully achieved. Pupils' work, particularly in lower key stage 2, demonstrates that pupils are more careful and precise when writing. They present their work well and to a very high quality. Often, pupils write to a standard beyond that expected for their age, using complex punctuation accurately and well, especially in Year 3. You continue to provide additional and effective support to the older pupils for whom the more demanding expectations prove a challenge.
- Together, we considered the quality of education for pupils who are disadvantaged or who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Currently, these pupils make good and more often accelerated progress from their individual starting points. This is because you have made these pupils a focus in your school improvement plan and ensured that the needs of every pupil are considered. Through your thoughtful and careful planning, you provide a range of additional support so that these pupils have the opportunity to learn quickly. You liaise with external agencies exceptionally well to ensure that pupils and families who require more specialised support have access to the precise provision needed. Through the creative use of your additional government funding, you have used the skills of your pupil premium champion to provide additional time for some of these pupils, who are making accelerated progress both personally and academically as a result.
- In the early years class, children get off to a flying start. The classroom is well equipped so children can easily develop their skills and find the resources they need to be independent in their learning. Children are provided with a wealth of opportunities to practise and develop their mathematical skills and understanding. In one mathematics lesson seen, boys were counting a large number of gems. 'This is hard,' a child said. However, they persevered with transferring and organising the gems into groups of tens until they found the correct answer of 60. They were delighted with their success.
- Similarly, children develop their understanding of sounds and letters easily and rapidly. This is because the teaching is precise and consistently effective. When the children practise writing words during their phonics lessons, they form their letters correctly and accurately repeat the sounds as they write. Children in the early years are exceptionally keen and focused in their learning. As a result, the proportion of children who leave at expected and above standards for their age continues to be greater than that found nationally.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that they:

- further increase the number of pupils who reach the required standard in mathematics by the end of key stage 2

- continue the work with disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities so that even more excel.

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

Yours sincerely

Kim Hall
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

- I gathered a wide range of evidence to judge the quality of teaching, learning and assessment over time. This included short observations of lessons in all classes, jointly with you and the deputy headteacher, and sampling of pupils' current work across all subjects and a wide range of abilities.
- I spoke informally to a number of pupils in classrooms and on the playground. The teaching of phonics in Reception was seen.
- Meetings were held with you, the leaders of the early years and representatives of the governing body. Minutes of governors' meetings were evaluated.
- I looked at a range of documentation including information about the school's self-evaluation and plans for future improvement.
- Policies and procedures for the safeguarding of pupils were examined including mandatory checks made during the recruitment of new staff and a case study about referrals made to external agencies.
- The views of 21 parents who responded to Parent View were taken into account, as well as the responses they made using the free-text service and through an email. The views of 41 pupils who responded to their questionnaire were considered along with the views of 13 staff who responded to the staff questionnaire.