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4 April 2017

Mrs Michelle Johnstone
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Dear Mrs Michelle Johnstone

Short inspection of St Mark's CofE (A) Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 14 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 June 2013.

This school continues to be good.

Leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The school has continued to improve because of your strong leadership and drive for excellence. All staff who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire said they were proud to be part of St Mark's Church of England (A) Primary. They all agree that the school is well led and managed and they are well cared for and supported to be successful in meeting pupils' needs.

You successfully address the challenges the school faces, including the frequent movement of pupils in and out of the school at different times of the school year because of their particular circumstances. The needs of pupils, however complex, are understood and learning is planned assiduously so that pupils make good rates of progress from their starting points whatever needs or vulnerabilities they may have. Pupils, parents and staff commented that the school is the centre of the community. One parent stated that St Mark's was 'like a family because they welcome everyone and make a place for them regardless of who they are or where they came from.'

Pupils behave well in lessons, at breaktimes and around school during unstructured times. In lessons pupils work well together, supporting and challenging each other to reflect on and improve their work. For example, work in pupils' books from Year 3 to Year 6 clearly demonstrates that pupils frequently work with their peers to evaluate and improve their writing. In the Reception classes, pupils help each other

to use their well-developed phonic knowledge to spell words such as 'yellow' to help their classmates describe a minibeast in their writing activity. At breaktimes pupils wait patiently to take turns on play equipment and help each other on and off apparatus. During my visit, I noted that pupils were consistently courteous and well-mannered to each other and adults.

Pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare are a strength of the school because of the high priority that leaders place on this aspect of the school's work. Pupils contribute well to the life of the school through roles such as the school council. For example, the school council recently suggested zoning the playground so that pupils could use the space safely to engage in a range of purposeful play activities.

You have ensured that the areas for improvement from the previous inspection have been fully addressed. There is a systematic approach to developing the skills, knowledge and understanding needed to help pupils become fluent writers. This approach effectively blends the use of phonics skills to develop more formal spelling with grammar and punctuation strategies that are enabling pupils to write for a wide range of purposes with increasing complexity. There is clear progression in writing from pupils' starting points across all year groups and for all groups of pupils, including those newly arrived from overseas.

Almost all year groups and groups of pupils are making good rates of progress from their starting points. However, while you have begun to develop reasoning and logic connected with problem-solving in mathematics, these aspects of mathematics are still in the early stages of development. Although governance is strong, governors are not always provided with clear-cut information that would help them to monitor school improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have ensured that there is a strong culture of safeguarding across all aspects of the school's work. You have ensured that safeguarding procedures are fit for purpose, and that records are detailed and of a high quality. The school is a safe environment for pupils because pupil welfare is at the forefront of all the school does. You have ensured that training for all staff is regular and appropriate for the needs of the school and its context. You have tailored training to ensure that staff have knowledge and understanding of risks, such as domestic violence and radicalisation, and what they should do if they have concerns. You, your governors and staff have a good understanding of the specific safeguarding concerns that relate to the context of the school and are alert to issues including the risks of children going missing from education. Designated safeguarding leads ensure that, where a response or action is required from outside agencies, they vigorously challenge them to act in the best interests of the pupils.

Inspection findings

- Pupil mobility is high and, as a result, the make-up of the school population is

rapidly changing. The school has welcomed refugees and asylum seekers from a wide range of countries, the majority of whom have little if any spoken English. Additionally, the school also caters for a significant number of more local pupils whose circumstances have led to them changing schools frequently. The school commits significant resources to support the needs of all pupils who have recently joined the school. This includes having effective systems to assess the needs of newly arrived pupils and appropriate support to enable pupils to settle quickly and begin to acquire language skills, such as in the non-threatening and supportive environment known as the 'Sunbeam' group. However, after making a good start many pupils move on before the school's efforts can come to fruition and the good progress they make during their time in this school is not always fully reflected in end-of-key-stage data. For example, less than half of the current Year 6 have completed the whole of their key stage 2 in the school.

- Pupils' progress is checked rigorously so that leaders can analyse where staff are having the most impact and where further improvements can be made. The school can demonstrate good rates of progress for almost all current pupils from their starting points across reading, writing and mathematics.
- You and your leaders keep a close watch on the progress all groups of pupils make and you intervene quickly to ensure that pupils receive timely support so they stay on track or catch up swiftly. Staff respond quickly to rectify misconceptions and, as a result, pupils make good progress within lessons and over time. You use interventions flexibly to ensure that the right level, duration and type of support is available to meet the different needs of pupils' circumstances.
- You have ample evidence in school to demonstrate clearly how well the stable population in the school makes good progress in reading. You and your leadership team have implemented effective strategies to intervene and support all pupils, through both whole-school approaches to reading and additional interventions from an extensive range of resources. You are keenly aware of the need to ensure that all pupils' outcomes are strong across all areas of the curriculum and that reading is the key to pupils accessing the broad and balanced curriculum that you have developed. This is especially true for pupils with low and middle prior attainment. Pupils entitled to the pupil premium make good progress in reading and writing from their starting points. The focus on developing early reading skills, including phonics, is a strength of the school. Pupils demonstrate how they not only use their phonics skills effectively in reading to sound out unknown words but also to support the spelling of words in their writing.
- Recent improvements in mathematics provision, including the introduction of a new scheme of work, are contributing to improving pupils' fluency in mathematics. This is because teaching is more effectively and systematically building on pupil's prior learning in number. However, pupils' ability to apply and reason logically in mathematics is underdeveloped and as a result pupils are not developing sufficient depth in their learning. This is slowing the progress for some pupils, especially those groups of pupils with lower and middle prior attainment.

- Governors are knowledgeable about the schools' strengths and weaknesses. They have a thorough understanding of the challenges the school faces but do not see this as an excuse. Like you, they have high aspirations and expectations for pupils in both their academic and emotional well-being. Your governors take an active role in gathering information from a range of external and internal sources so that they can be well informed and provide you with effective support and challenge. Governors regularly review their effectiveness and try to improve. For example, governors recently commissioned a review of their systems, structure and effectiveness. Your governors participate in a significant amount of training to ensure that they are able to take informed strategic decisions and to evaluate your work and that of other school leaders. Governors have access to a significant amount of information but it is not currently sufficiently precise to help them to hold leaders to account for pupils' rates of improvement.
- You have effective systems in place to ensure and promote good attendance. You have given attendance a high priority and committed time and resources to successfully reducing absence rates among all groups of pupils. Everyone in school continues to promote attendance by challenging parents about the importance of good attendance and through your safeguarding procedures in identifying patterns of poor attendance. Staff are well aware of, and are increasingly able to address, the underlying reasons for current incidents of absence so that pupils' attendance improves.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- governors have access to sufficiently precise information to enable them to hold leaders accountable for rates of improvement
- teachers further develop the use of reasoning, logic and problem-solving in mathematics.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the executive board, the director of education for the Diocese of Lichfield, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Stoke-on-Trent. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Demmerling
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I conducted brief visits to classes across all year groups with you and the head of school. I reviewed pupils' work with the head of school and I heard a group of pupils read. I spoke to pupils in lessons and parents on the

playground at the end of the school day. I met with you, office staff and the designated safeguarding lead to review logs and documents relating to safeguarding arrangements in your school. I observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and around school. I scrutinised several documents including your assessment analysis, school self-evaluation and your school development plan. I took account of parental responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and comments received electronically. I also took account of the 34 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire. I met with a group of governors and a representative from the local authority.