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Mr John Burke
Headteacher
St Charles' Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School
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Dear Mr Burke

Short inspection of St Charles' Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 25 April 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 last inspection. You are proud of this happy, welcoming school's work but are not content to rest upon its laurels. After taking up post in January 2017, you quickly set about reviewing the school's performance, systems and practices in a fresh and insightful manner. A drive for betterment is tangible in the actions resulting from this careful scrutiny. Your suitably high aspirations and expectations, alongside your positive, empowering style of leadership, is leading to a heightened ambition for pupils among a committed staff and governing body. Experienced diocesan colleagues and the local authority are supportive of your endeavours. As a result of your clear focus and this strong collaboration, pupils flourish and continue to make good or better progress from their different starting points.

The overarching area for improvement identified in the 2013 inspection report was to improve teaching further. Teaching across key stages is good. Teachers display strong subject knowledge and effective questioning skills. A particular strength is the successful manner in which staff motivate pupils. Pupils want to do their best and find learning 'fun'. They are resilient to failure, saying help is always on hand because adults 'care about you'. Staff appreciate the professional development opportunities and support from management feeling it 'is second to none'. Precision and consistency in recording feedback for teachers about their performance is, however, lacking at times. You accept that greater detail and rigour in the monitoring of teaching and learning, especially by subject leaders who are new to

post, is crucial to the continuous cycle of advancement that you expect.

The previous inspection also challenged leaders to develop pupils' number skills and knowledge, and to improve pupils' depths of learning across subjects. Leaders and governors have responded with success to recommendations. All pupils, including children in the Reception class, understand and use mathematical terminology confidently. Pupils recall multiplication facts and number bonds deftly. Current pupils in each key stage use and apply their knowledge to solve increasingly sophisticated mathematical problems as they move through the school. In 2016, the proportion of pupils reaching expected standards in mathematics in key stage 2 was well above that seen nationally. The proportion of pupils reaching a greater depth of learning in reading as well as the expected standard exceeded national averages. Undoubtedly, efforts are bearing fruit. You have, however, correctly pinpointed where further work is needed, particularly in key stage 1. Challenge for the most able pupils and boys' writing are areas targeted for improvement as you seek to ensure that evermore pupils reach the highest standards of which they are capable.

You have ensured that the nurturing and distinctively spiritual ethos is well-embedded and lends itself to the promotion of pupils' social, moral and cultural development effectively. Pupils find school enjoyable and this is demonstrated by their good attendance. Pupils' tolerance and respect for others are evident in their excellent conduct and good behaviour. Parents, staff and pupils have highly positive views of their school. One parent's view succinctly captured the essence of others: 'Children are at the centre of everything that happens at St Charles'. Staff enjoy working here. Relationships between adults and pupils are upbeat and enabling. Pupils take pride in adopting the additional responsibilities that roles such as pupil governor, eco-warrior or buddy bring. They feel safe, well-looked after and valued by adults; central to the school's work indeed.

Safeguarding is effective.

The safety and protection of pupils is integral to the work of your school. Checks on the suitability of adults working with children are thorough and recruitment procedures are robust. You make sure that staff and governors are regularly updated on the most recent guidance and statutory information. Safeguarding and child protection training events are maintained on a rolling programme. This means adults are well informed and understand how to keep pupils free from harm. Staff know how to assess risks and report any concerns they may have.

During the inspection, pupils routinely used the term 'safe' to describe how school makes them feel. Helpful, attentive staff, the good behaviour and friendliness of their peers and a safe, secure site were cited as reasons why they feel this way. Pupils' knowledge and understanding of how to stay safe online is developed effectively through regular discussions, activities and information sharing. Parents agree that this is a 'safe environment' with a 'caring, nurturing atmosphere'.

Inspection findings

- Reception children enter school from a wide range of pre-school providers with broadly typical skills and abilities for their age. The early years leader and staff have created a bright, inviting environment that sparks children's interests and encourages exploration both indoors and outside. Staff challenge and support children effectively to develop basic skills in English and mathematics quickly. Due to the effectiveness of teaching and leadership, the proportion of pupils reaching a good level of development has improved steadily over time to match national averages. This means the majority of children are now well prepared for the challenges of Year 1. You and the early years leader have correctly identified boys' writing and additional challenge for some of the most able children as important next steps in building upon the successes of the early years further.
- Teaching staff take due note of pupils' interests to plan stimulating topics that ensure the full range of national curriculum requirements are met. Pupils are inspired to learn about subjects and through subjects. Ambitions are stirred and pupils talk with enthusiasm about becoming teachers, artists, athletes and scientists. Warm, respectful relationships abound and classrooms, as well as playgrounds, are enjoyable places to learn and develop. Crucially, boys' writing skills are now beginning to blossom, and the proportion of current pupils reaching a greater depth of learning across subjects is increasing. Consistency, support and challenge are your bywords to ensure that these emerging improvements are well embedded, particularly with regards to key stage 1 and the early years.
- Good leadership is evident. Staff and governors are energised by your vision for improvement and your senior leadership team work well in partnership towards its realisation. Several subject leaders, however, are very new to post. While fired with enthusiasm and able to demonstrate clear strengths with regards to the relevant subject knowledge and skills, not all are yet leading and driving their subjects expertly.
- Senior leaders monitor teaching and learning regularly. They look at pupils' work, examine information about pupils' outcomes, talk with pupils about their work and observe teaching. Staff feel integral to leaders' improvement priorities and are keen to sharpen their skills further. An increased focus on making sure that staff have frequent opportunities to discuss pupils' progress, particularly in the core subjects of mathematics and English, is leading to improvements in teaching and learning. You have found, however, that analyses and systems for capturing the core findings of monitoring across the curriculum lack consistency and, at times, detail; a flaw that you are intent on eradicating.
- You value governors' cooperation and welcome their challenges. Governors demonstrate their commitment to improvement in various ways. By carefully auditing the existing skills of governors prior to appointing new recruits, an appropriate range of expertise and experience is building successfully. Governors new to the role, in particular, are taking increasing advantage of training, both online opportunities and via the local authority's governor services. Several have stepped up the frequency of their involvement with school practices, conducting monitoring visits, meeting with staff and looking at pupils' work first hand. Governors have a secure understanding of the impact of funding on pupil

premium pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Consequently, all groups of pupils are supported to make good progress as governors execute their roles and responsibilities assuredly.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- boys' writing skills continue to improve apace
- the most able pupils, particularly those in key stage 1 and the early years, are consistently challenged to reach greater depths of learning in all subjects
- new subject leaders are supported, challenged and held fully accountable for pupils' outcomes in their areas of responsibility
- monitoring processes in terms of teaching and learning are sharpened across all subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection I met with you, a group of governors including the chair of the governing body, pupil governors, a representative from the local authority and subject leaders. I conducted observations of teaching and learning in all year groups jointly with you and looked at pupils' work in books and during lessons. I examined a range of documentation, including policies, the school's self-evaluation and school improvement plans as well as behaviour and safeguarding information. I took account of 55 free-text messages from parents and 56 parental responses on Ofsted's Parent View. I also paid attention to the 15 survey responses from staff and 31 responses from pupils. I paid particular attention during this short inspection to the effectiveness of governance, progress for the most able pupils, subject leadership, pupils' writing and the attendance of key groups.