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Mrs Katherine Clough
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Clough

Short inspection of Syresham St James CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 16 May 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.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your strong leadership has driven a culture of high expectations for pupils' welfare and well-being as well as good achievement across the full and rich curriculum. This has ensured that all groups of pupils are securing good outcomes across the school. You, your governors and your staff are committed to ensuring that every single pupil in the school achieves the best they can. Leaders all have a clear understanding of the school's strengths, weaknesses and next steps for development.

The governing body is extremely well organised and informed as a result of good reports from the school's leaders and teachers and carefully focused governor monitoring. The balance of challenge and support is just right, and clear action plans and evaluations ensure that the governing body is efficient in its work. Parents are almost unanimous in their support for the 'wonderful' community atmosphere, the wide range of additional activities in sport, music and drama, good teaching and the excellent relationships which they have with the school's staff.

The main area for improvement identified in the 2013 inspection report was to improve teaching further. Teaching across all key stages is good and continues to improve. Pupils enjoy learning because lessons are interesting and activities stimulate their interests.

In the early years, this improvement has resulted in an increased proportion of children now achieving a good level of development by the end of Reception. The proportions of

children who now exceed this level in reading and writing have increased due to a rigorous focus on children's next steps for learning and a focus on enhancing learning outside, particularly to engage the boys. Excellent links with parents to support children's learning have also played a significant role.

Phonics teaching is good and, now that the Nursery has come under the management of the school, the increased focus on early phonics has been a success this year. The small phonics teaching group approach across Reception and key stage 1 has ensured that lessons are targeted to ensure that pupils make good progress. The decision to check individual progress more frequently and earlier in the year has ensured that any individual additional support now has a greater impact, especially on progress in Year 1. Pupils still at the early stages with their phonics knowledge who read to me were able to confidently blend unknown words independently. Most-able key stage 1 pupils and older pupils read a good range of challenging texts. They are able to talk confidently about books that they have enjoyed and answer a range of questions appropriate to their ability, including those which require well-developed inference skills.

Writing in key stage 1 has rightly been an area for improvement this year and continues to be so. Pupils are not always supported well enough to include the most important features in their writing to help them to improve. However, in key stage 2, sequences of lessons build up pupils' skills well over time. Each lesson is very well focused on a specific aspect of writing, so pupils can practise each skill and also learn to combine these into longer pieces of writing. Pupils are clear about what they need to include in their writing to achieve well, as demonstrated in pupils' recent letters of complaint, outlining their outrage at finding a used medical plaster in a packet of sweets! There are good opportunities for pupils to edit their writing and, as a result, pupils improve their subsequent first drafts next time they write.

Mathematics has been a focus in key stage 2. Pupils' basic skills are strong because of the increased focus through additional mathematics skills sessions. These help children to learn, for example, their times tables through games and check-ups, and these sessions have been successful. The increased focus by teachers on ensuring that problem-solving and reasoning skills are developed alongside fluency is showing some success, but this is still an area for continued development across the whole school.

An increased focus on handwriting has ensured that standards of presentation are good. Pupils show a pride in their work and generally make good choices when planning their work and setting it out.

Across the curriculum, the focus on individual pupils' progress, and where additional support is required, is extremely well planned, structured and evaluated. Short, focused tests, as well as teachers' own assessments in class, are used effectively to highlight any individual gaps in learning. Teaching assistants are deployed effectively to support those pupils who need extra help. Changes in the way that computers are deployed and investment in new hardware in the school has greatly improved the ability of teachers to use information and communication technology effectively in all subjects. This was also an area outlined for improvement at the last inspection.

You are aware that your updated equal opportunities policy does not reflect the good practice at the school. Staff, pupils, parents and members of the wider community are all treated with equal respect by everyone at the school. Pupils and staff are accepting of individual differences, including those often represented in other cultures or by those with protected characteristics. Following the school's previous inspection, the curriculum has been widened and the personal and social education curriculum rewritten to ensure that pupils have broadened their understanding of the richness and diversity of cultural traditions within our society. For example, the pupils of Irish Traveller heritage, prior to leaving the school recently, gave a presentation and display outlining their history and culture. The other pupils in the school found this very interesting. It also helped to engage the pupils in discussions about similarities and differences between varied cultures in a positive way.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and all the staff and governors take safety very seriously and have created a strong culture of care and safeguarding. Safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and checks on the suitability of adults working with children are thorough. Recruitment procedures are robust, record-keeping is well organised and the site is secure. You ensure that staff and governors are regularly updated on the most recent guidance so that you meet statutory guidelines.

The pupils know how to keep themselves safe, for example when online, and feel safe in school. There are a few unfriendly incidents which occur at the school, but pupils say that when they do occur, they are dealt with very well. The pupils explained that because the school was so small, they all know each other very well and all get on really well together.

Inspection findings

- During this inspection, I focused on:
 - how well leaders addressed any weaknesses in phonics
 - improvements to the teaching of writing at key stage 1 and mathematics at key stage 2
 - the response of leaders to raising attendance, including improving persistent absence
 - how well leaders ensure that equality is at the core of the school's ethos.
- Changes to the way that mathematics is taught have been introduced across the school. Pupils enjoy this new approach, which includes a greater focus on using apparatus and pictorial representations to help understand new concepts and solve problems. There is also an increased expectation on pupils to use and explain their reasoning. All pupils, including the most able, have better opportunities, especially at key stage 2 (as a result of the school's focus) to learn through problem solving and reasoning. However, further work remains across the school to ensure that pupils do not spend too much time on fluency activities before they are challenged to apply their

learning.

- Phonics outcomes, although in line with those nationally in recent years, have not yet improved further. However, the teaching in phonics has been better focused on ensuring that every pupil makes the best progress. You now check on pupils' learning more carefully and ensure that any gaps in pupils' phonics knowledge are supported through additional one-to-one sessions.
- During the inspection, it became evident that there were some improvements still required to raise attainment in writing at the expected standard and at greater depth for pupils in key stage 1. Good support has been provided to improve sequences of teaching and to ensure that teaching helps pupils to have a better understanding of what they need to include in their writing to write well. However, although writing is of a good standard, this remains an area for further development. Books in key stage 1 show that too many pieces of pupils' writing do not show enough of the elements that pupils need to demonstrate securely and regularly.
- Attendance at the end of the spring term was 96.8%, which is above average and an improvement on recent years. There is still a very small minority of pupils whose attendance is below that expected, and leaders continue to support and challenge these pupils and their families to improve. The pupils of Irish Traveller heritage gradually left the school to move on over the past year. However, many of these pupils were showing improved attendance as a result of the school's good relationships with parents and the increased importance placed on good attendance. This improved relationship also included parents informing the school when they were leaving to travel for short periods of time. Good one-to-one support was in place for when pupils returned to school to ensure that catch-up in pupils' learning was as efficient as possible.
- An outdated equalities policy suggested that the leaders at the school did not recognise the importance of promoting the integration of people with protected characteristics at the school or within its wider community. However, this policy does not match the actual embedded good practice evident in every aspect of school life. The school's values of courage, love, forgiveness, respect, generosity and fairness are the backbone of the school's ethos. Pupils regularly explore what these values mean in their everyday life, as well as how their British values impact on their lives and those of others. Staff do not shy away from discussions with pupils about, for example, same sex marriage. Sometimes, when such issues have been raised in school, a text will be sent to parents so that they will know why their child might choose to continue to explore or ask questions about these issues at home. Activities that span age groups, which often take place as part of learning in school assemblies, are really enjoyed by the pupils and give them the opportunity to discuss various issues at length. Pupils now also have a much better understanding about other faiths and cultures, which was an area for development from the last inspection.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils' progress in writing continues to improve in key stage 1 so that it matches the rates of progress made in reading and mathematics
- better opportunities are provided for pupils to develop their mathematical problem solving and reasoning
- the equal opportunities policy is updated so that it reflects legal requirements and the good practice currently in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Angela Kirk
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Prior to the inspection, I checked the school's website to ensure that it met the legal requirements. During this inspection, I met with you and a number of your teachers, including those with leadership responsibilities. I also met with members of the governing body, including the chair. We conducted a tour of the school together and visited all classes to see pupils and staff at work. The quality of work in books was scrutinised and we evaluated pupils' different starting points when considering their progress. I listened to pupils read, spoke to a number of parents at the start of the school day and met with pupils. The views of the 37 parents using the online Parent View survey were considered. I evaluated a range of documents provided by the school, including the school's improvement plan, leaders' evaluations, and governors' minutes of their meetings, their monitoring visit reports and action plans.