

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



4 October 2017

Vanessa Hunt
Headteacher
St Mary's CofE Primary School, Northchurch
Northchurch
Berkhamsted
Hertfordshire
HP4 3QZ

Dear Miss Hunt

Short inspection of St Mary's CofE Primary School, Northchurch

Following my visit to the school on 12 September 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 May 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You took over the role of headteacher of St Mary's in January 2015 and there have been several changes to the complement of the governing body since then, including the chair of governors. However, the biggest challenge has been the change of the school from a first to a primary school. You, the staff and the pupils have risen admirably to that challenge. The older pupils love to take care of and 'look out for' the younger pupils. They take great pride in the extra responsibilities they have in upper key stage 2 and have adapted extremely well to being part of the primary school. That is because the school, as one parent put it, 'develops children as good citizens, as well as academically'.

You wasted no time in communicating your vision for everyone to succeed, ensuring that staff are well equipped to teach the extended age range. You have successfully focused on maintaining and improving the quality of education so that pupils can progress both personally and academically. As one parent put it, the school is 'a lovely, caring but driven environment'. It is to your credit that staffing has been stable, with very few changes since May 2014. Staff are proud to work at St Mary's and feel well supported by you and your governors. You have built an increasingly strong leadership team, both at senior and middle leader level, although you acknowledge that the latter is still a work in progress. Staff value the professional development they have been given and they are clear about what support will best

help them to improve their practice. This demonstrates the school's collective high expectations and capacity to continue to improve.

Since the previous inspection, you have focused on ensuring that the quality of teaching is at least good throughout the school. Evidence from your own monitoring, work in pupils' books and assessment information confirm that this is the case, particularly in writing. It is clear that children get off to a flying start in the early years. At this early stage in the academic year, it was refreshing to see children who were so settled and enjoying the very stimulating environment in both the Nursery and Reception classes. This momentum continues into key stage 1, where outcomes for pupils in reading, writing, mathematics and phonics continue to be at least above expectations.

The school's first cohort of pupils in Year 6 was particularly small. Pupils' outcomes at the end of key stage 2 in 2016 were above the minimum standards that the government sets. Progress in reading, writing and mathematics was above the national average. Provisional results for 2017 show an increase in achievement. Some pupils were only one mark away from attaining the expected standard. The proportion of pupils attaining greater depth in reading, writing and mathematics also appears to have increased.

Upon your arrival, you quickly highlighted that the most able pupils were not always challenged and that teachers' expectations were not always as high as they should be. It is evident from your own monitoring, and from the ongoing assessment of pupils' outcomes, that the introduction of the 'growth mindset' has had considerable impact on both staff and pupils. Pupils are encouraged to think hard about their work and challenge themselves. There is always a challenge or an extension task in lessons and pupils are encouraged to select work that makes them think hard about their learning. The work scrutiny we carried out together showed that the most able pupils are indeed challenged and sometimes produce high-quality written work. As one parent reported: 'My able daughter has been resistant to trying things. But she is encouraged to 'have a go' and keep trying – what great life skills!' It is clear that most-able pupils are very aware of their audience when writing and are using some advanced authorial techniques with aplomb. For example, one pupil wrote: 'The sun had risen long ago and the town was peaceful until, at 9.07, the folk were out and about.' However, pupils do not have regular opportunities to write at length and to practise their basic English skills in subjects like history and geography. Presentation is still not good enough. Some staff members do not model good handwriting, which does not, therefore, set a good example to pupils.

You have developed the curriculum to ensure that all pupils make as much progress as they are able. The curriculum is littered with many enrichment activities, from visits to places of worship including a Buddhist temple and a mosque, to a trip to Hazard Alley and the Verulamium Museum. You have also developed your middle leaders, at least one of whom is beginning to monitor standards in her subjects. Teachers make good use of the school's history and take advantage of local residents who come and talk to them about life long ago. Many other people visit the school, for example to encourage pupils to take part in musical activities, to

better understand road and internet safety or to see how a professional author works. Pupils are very excited about the scheduled visit by Ian Whybrow and have been reading his books as part of literacy lessons. The imminent launch of the 'story shack' is giving reading, and indeed writing, a palpable momentum in the school. It is no wonder, therefore, that pupils describe their lessons as 'fun and interesting'.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and staff look after pupils well. A strong culture of care is evident and, consequently, pupils are happy and feel safe at school. As one parent put it: 'St Mary's is a special school where my children feel nurtured and important.' You have ensured that all safeguarding procedures are fit for purpose. Records are detailed and of good quality, showing clearly that the school takes timely and appropriate action to safeguard children and pupils.

You and your staff know children and pupils across the school extremely well as individuals. You and your special educational needs coordinator, in particular, maintain a close eye on the vulnerable pupils who are most in need of support. It is clear that the well-established relationships that all staff have with parents provide strong support for families, as well as for children and pupils. You are tenacious in your determination to ensure that children and pupils receive whatever they need to help them to be successful and enjoy school. The vast majority of children and pupils make good academic and social progress despite some considerable challenges. Pupils are clearly appreciative of the help that teachers give them. The vast majority would recommend this 'friendly and fair' school to a friend moving into the area.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry was to see the improvement the school has made in the quality of teaching since the previous inspection.
- Inspection evidence and your own monitoring of teaching and learning confirm that teaching is enabling the vast majority of pupils to make at least expected progress and, more often than not, good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Progress for the majority of the first class of Year 6 pupils in 2016 in reading, writing and mathematics was above the national average. Provisional results for 2017 appear to be even better, particularly for the most able pupils, of whom a third appear to have gained greater depth in reading, writing and mathematics.
- Pupils' achievement in key stage 1 continues to be above the national average in reading, writing and mathematics. A significant proportion of pupils achieved the higher standards in reading and mathematics in 2014, and in reading and writing in 2015. The results in 2016 and the emerging picture for 2017 are equally positive in all areas, including phonics.
- Children in the early years get a great start to their education because the area is led very effectively. Teachers in both Nursery and Reception are very able. They work closely together to ensure that they and their respective teams adapt the

curriculum to suit the needs of individuals and groups of children. The proportion of children who attain a good level of development at the end of their time in Reception has increased steadily since 2014 to be above the national average in 2015 and 2016. Early indications for 2017 are that the picture is similar.

- Evidence seen during the inspection of the provision for the most vulnerable pupils throughout the school shows that they are progressing well, despite many barriers to their learning. Teachers and leaders adapt provision quickly if it is not working to ensure that these pupils are at least progressing in line with their classmates. On occasion, this has not been the case. Considerable evidence seen during the inspection of leaders' monitoring, assessment and interventions and liaison with parents and external agencies confirms that no stone is left unturned to ensure that pupils make the best progress they can.
- My second line of enquiry was to see the provision for, and improvement in, pupils' writing across the curriculum. Together we observed literacy provision throughout the school and learning in all classes. It is evident that teachers, particularly in the early years and key stage 1, offer many opportunities for children and pupils to write and practise their phonics skills. A display of pupils' writing outside of the Year 1 classroom is testament to the good grounding they have had. For so early in the term, sensible guesses of common and tricky words and some degree of accuracy were evident.
- The books we looked at in Year 2 showed writing to be developing well. Teachers plan many opportunities for pupils to write in religious education, science, history and geography lessons. Some write at length and the most able pupils are developing a good understanding of writing for different occasions. Good progress is evident in pupils' books and it is mostly the same for all groups of pupils. Teachers in key stage 1 model writing well and ask probing questions to ensure that pupils think about what they are writing and how to make it exciting.
- Pupils in key stage 2 have less experience of writing at length in subjects other than English, science and religious education. Middle leaders are aware that this is an area that is in need of further development. Pupils' books from last year show that the majority are now making good progress. Where this is not so, there are many and varied reasons. Sometimes these barriers include poor attendance and social problems. The school is working hard to address all areas of concern, with evident impact for individual pupils.
- Presentation of written work across the school is still not good enough. Teachers' expectations are not as high as they need to be to ensure that pupils show pride in their work. The relatively new handwriting policy is beginning to be used well, particularly in key stage 1. However, it is not modelled well by some teachers in key stage 2, either in written feedback to pupils or on the whiteboards.
- My third key line of enquiry was about the curriculum. As part of that enquiry, we agreed that I would look at the delivery of the curriculum and middle leadership. It is clear that you have done considerable work in this area, although it is still developing. Some subjects are led and managed more effectively than others, for a variety of reasons. Some leaders have only just been given responsibility for their subject areas. As yet, middle leaders do not consistently monitor progress and standards in subjects other than English, mathematics and science. There is,

however, good capacity within the team to develop further. There is, for example, very good practice in the leadership of science.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- middle leaders fully understand the part they play in raising whole-school standards in the subjects for which they are responsible
- teachers provide opportunities for pupils to write at length and practise their basic English skills in subjects like geography and history, particularly in key stage 2
- teachers have high expectations of themselves and of pupils in applying the school's handwriting policy consistently and in presenting their work with pride.

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

Yours sincerely

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and your leadership team to discuss progress since the previous inspection and to share my lines of enquiry. In addition, I held meetings with three governors, including the chair of the governing body, and a group of 10 pupils from across the school. I spoke with your local improvement partner on the telephone and undertook a scrutiny of writing throughout the school with you and your leaders.

As part of the inspection, I looked at a variety of documents and records, including your self-evaluation summary, the school development plans and the school's assessment information. I also scrutinised the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children and information in relation to attendance and behaviour.

Together we undertook observations of learning across the school, viewed work in pupils' books, listened to some pupils read and spoke with pupils about their learning. I briefly observed pupils going out to play and during breaktime and lunchtime, and held conversations with them about their work and their views of the school. I examined the survey results from 17 members of staff and 57 pupils.

Finally, I took into account two emails from parents, and considered the responses of 59 parents to the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View. This included comments many had made by text.