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19 October 2017

Mrs Helen McCarney
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mrs McCarney

Short inspection of St Michael's VA Junior School

Following my visit to the school on 21 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 December 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. You, the staff and governors at St Michael's VA Junior School are outward looking, drawing on skills, expertise and good practice beyond the school. You are also reflective, looking in detail at what you do in school and where things could be improved.

You and your team acknowledge that after a number of years of high results at the end of Year 6, the dip in 2016 outcomes was unexpected. However, you were determined to ensure that this was not repeated. You analysed what had gone wrong and swiftly put in place a range of changes to address any shortcomings. This proved effective and in 2017 the unvalidated outcomes at the expected standard returned to slightly above national averages.

This determined response characterises the school and your leadership. It is reflected in the way you successfully tackled the areas for improvement from the previous inspection by improving the quality and consistency of teaching. Your well-thought-out current plans for improvement also demonstrate your focus on school development. These plans recognise that more needs to be done to improve the progress of the most able pupils.

You are highly ambitious for all pupils and passionate about providing a broad and interesting educational experience for every pupil. You provide exceptional leadership for

your team. Staff spoken to during the inspection recognise the benefits that working at the school brings to their professional development. Every member of staff who responded to Ofsted's online staff survey said that they are proud to be a member of staff at the school. Your drive for improvement is infectious, and all staff and governors share your commitment to high achievement for all pupils.

Governors provide support and challenge in equal measure. They are genuinely excited by changes which help the school to move forward. However, they still check the rationale for the changes and evaluate whether these changes provide good value for money. Governors have the utmost respect for you as a leader, but are not afraid to challenge you when needed.

Teaching is good because you and other leaders make very clear what you expect from all staff. You provide effective support for teachers in developing their practice. Staff enjoy good relationships with pupils. Teachers provide work that is interesting and captures pupils' imagination, often using drama techniques to bring lessons alive. Staff use questioning to good effect to check pupils' understanding and additional adults make a good contribution to moving pupils' learning on.

Pupils love their school and talk about it with enthusiasm. They told me about the good support they receive from all adults in school and about the interesting things they learn in lessons. Pupils speak with particular enthusiasm about their learning in history, for example the Romans and the Second World War, and about the good range of clubs offered to pupils. One pupil spoke about the trips they have enjoyed and in particular the trip to London which he described as 'amazing'. You enrich the curriculum by events such as 'enterprise week' when pupils learn about the world of work including what it means to be a scientist. I also saw examples, such as Forest School, being used effectively to develop pupils' mathematical understanding.

Pupils behave very well in school because leaders have established good systems which ensure consistency in how incidents are tackled. Pupils say that behaviour is good in school and that bullying is extremely rare. Most parents agree, although a small number of those who provided comments through Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were concerned about behaviour. These concerns were not borne out by inspection evidence including observation of pupils during the inspection and scrutiny of the school's detailed behaviour records. Leaders provide a wealth of opportunities for pupils to develop their social skills including working as digital leaders and as peer mentors. Pupils take these responsibilities seriously and enjoy developing their leadership skills as they progress through the school.

The majority of parents who responded to Parent View are happy with the school and feel that their children are safe and well-cared-for. Typical of many of the comments received were 'The school makes children feel valued for who they are' and 'St Michael's is an excellent school'. However, a small minority of parents commented that communication with parents could still be better.

Safeguarding is effective.

Systems for keeping pupils safe in school are exemplary. All statutory safeguarding requirements, including checks in staff appointments, are carried out and recorded appropriately. The pastoral team carefully tracks and records any concerns, and follows these up rigorously. The team is tenacious in ensuring that external agencies act when needed. They have established excellent links with other services including, for example, the local police and services that support children who have experienced domestic abuse.

Your whole team is highly conscious of the particular issues affecting this school community and has put in place systems to address these with individuals and with pupils more generally. For example, you have ensured that work on safe relationships is a regular part of the personal development programme. You also bought in a mentor to work with boys to discuss behaviour, and what it means to be a positive male role model when they get older.

I spoke with pupils about how they are helped to keep themselves safe, for example when online. Pupils know exactly what to share, and what not to share, online because this is taught well in school. Pupils say that the school is a safe place and the majority of parents agree with this view.

Inspection findings

- The first area that we agreed I would look at during the inspection was how well you and other leaders ensure that teaching is consistently good and how well teachers challenge the most able pupils. These were areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report. Since then, the school has grown in numbers. It now has four parallel classes in each year group so I wanted to see how you make sure that all pupils benefit from equally high-quality teaching. In 2017, the unvalidated results show that the proportion of pupils in Year 6 achieving the higher standard in reading and mathematics was lower than that found nationally. Consequently, I wanted to check that teachers are meeting the needs of the most able pupils in the school.
- I found that you and your team have highly rigorous systems in place for ensuring consistency across classes in the same year group and between different year groups. Year group leaders hold their teams to account for the quality of teaching and learning and the progress pupils make. Leaders meet with their teams weekly, look at pupils' work regularly and share good practice. New subject teams for English and mathematics now provide another helpful layer of checks by comparing pupils' progress and work from year to year in these subjects.
- You and your senior leaders check the overall quality of teaching and learning very regularly and provide clear feedback for staff to work on. I saw leaders revisit areas that they consider the most important to secure improvement, and ensure that all staff understand leaders' expectations.
- Together we visited classes and looked at pupils' work. I saw evidence that teachers regularly plan work with more demanding challenges for the most able pupils and those who have quickly grasped concepts. Teachers give feedback to pupils which often provides further extension to move learning on.

- In some classes, I saw good evidence of reasoning and problem-solving in mathematics which ensures that pupils, including the most able, apply their learning in different contexts and so develop a deeper understanding of mathematics. Occasionally, the most able pupils complete work which is too easy and teachers do not pick this up swiftly enough to move learning on.
- In writing, some of the most able pupils still make basic errors, for example in the use of tenses, punctuation and incorrect spelling of words that they should know. This is because teachers do not consistently ensure that pupils use these basic skills on a daily basis, particularly in Years 3 and 4, so good habits are not firmly established.
- The next area I looked at during the inspection was how well adults meet the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. This was because the school has a higher than average proportion of these pupils.
- I met with the leader for special educational needs and/or disabilities and observed pupils in classes and working with additional adults. I found that pupils make good progress from their starting points because leaders plan and evaluate support very carefully. Leaders showed me examples of some of the support that they have put in place and we looked at the evidence of its impact. For example, we looked at a programme to improve reading and saw that many pupils make exceptional progress in this area.
- Leaders carefully track the progress of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities in all areas, for example looking at pupils' emotional and social development as well as their academic progress. As a result, leaders have a well-rounded and accurate picture of the progress of pupils who have needs in these areas.
- Leaders ensure that class teachers take responsibility for the progress of all pupils in their class including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. They meet with teachers regularly and check how well teachers meet these pupils' needs when working with the rest of the class, checking progress against pupils' individual targets.
- Additional adults provide good support for pupils in class and outside class. This support is provided sensitively and with due regard to allowing these pupils to develop increasing independence as they progress through the school.
- The next area we agreed I would look at during the inspection was the effectiveness of leaders at all levels. This was because there have been recent changes in leadership, including you, as headteacher, taking on the leadership of a third school for this year. I wanted to evaluate how well leaders have been prepared for their responsibilities and how governors are holding leaders to account.
- Under your expert leadership, other leaders have developed their skills and expertise so that you work together very effectively as a leadership team. You have provided a wealth of training for staff within school and by using external consultants. As a result, leaders at all levels recognise the role they play in securing further improvements in teaching and learning, and pupils' progress. They know where there are strengths and where there is still more to do, and produce clear plans which are moving the school forward.

- You support new staff well. Three teachers have joined the school recently and you have made sure that they have support from experienced staff to help and guide them during their first year at the school.
- Governors have carefully planned for the changes in leadership. They have not allowed their confidence in your skills to cloud their understanding of the possible challenges, and benefits, of the new arrangements. Governors have already planned how they will check the impact of changes on the quality of teaching, pupils' progress and the well-being of staff and pupils.
- The final area I investigated during the inspection was pupils' attendance. You and your team are very aware that attendance remains an area for improvement for the school. Your team works relentlessly to reduce absences, for example meeting with parents, sending out regular letters to inform parents about their child's attendance, regular reminders in newsletters and the involvement of the school's attendance officer. As a result, attendance is showing signs of improvement but is still below that found nationally.
- In particular, the attendance of a number of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those who are disadvantaged, is too low. Leaders are aware that they need to continue to identify ways to improve this, including drawing on good practice of other schools locally and beyond.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- teachers plan work which more consistently challenges the most able pupils so that more reach the higher standards at the end of Year 6
- teachers improve pupils' spelling, punctuation and grammar so that consistently good habits are established in pupils' writing
- leaders continue to work to improve attendance, particularly of the most vulnerable pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Maria Curry
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, your leadership team, year leaders and four governors. I met with a group of pupils from Years 3, 4, 5 and 6. I scrutinised a range of documents, including information on pupils' progress, safeguarding, development planning and the school's self-evaluation. I visited all classes and evaluated pupils' work. I checked the school's website and found it to meet requirements on the publication of specified information.