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Miss Patricia Pickering
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Dear Miss Pickering

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School, Bicester

Following my visit to the school on 19 October 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 February 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 well aware of the school's strengths and those areas requiring further development as a result of your in-depth evaluation of the school's performance. At the same time, you have high expectations for pupils' achievement and ensure that pupils learn well and develop good social skills. Most parents would recommend the school to others. This is because the school has helped their children to learn and develop well. As one parent told me, 'They (the staff) have turned my child around.'

Governors support the school well and challenge you to drive further improvement. Members of the leadership team provide clear strategic direction. They know what needs to be done to ensure that pupils continue to achieve well. Pupils enjoy coming to school. The wide-ranging curriculum means that children in the early years and pupils throughout the school enjoy many subjects. One pupil said, 'I don't like history. I love it.' Many pupils spoke of the strong relationships between teachers and themselves. This contributes positively to their engagement and enthusiasm for learning. All staff support and challenge pupils to do their best. Pupils I spoke to are ambitious for their future.

Together with highly effective support from the deputy headteacher, you have responded well to the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. The sharing of good practice within the school and training for staff are leading to more high-quality teaching. The most able pupils are challenged appropriately.

Teachers' clear explanations ensure that pupils know what adults expect of them in lessons. Staff make effective checks on pupils' learning in class and this enables pupils to achieve consistently well.

You continue to focus on the pursuit of excellence so that all areas of the school's provision are very strong. You are working with leaders and teachers to ensure that they fully understand the impact of their actions on pupils' progress and attainment. For example, you have rightly focused on ensuring that teachers challenge pupils to make more rapid progress in the development of their writing skills.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders ensure that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that records are detailed and of high quality. These arrangements are understood by all staff and governors. Staff new to the school have a comprehensive induction programme to help them fully understand their roles and safeguarding responsibilities.

You, your staff and governors work well to ensure that there is a strong culture of vigilance across the school. Governors regularly monitor the child protection arrangements to make sure that pupils are safe. Leaders and governors continuously seek further ways to improve the school's procedures to safeguard pupils. They are very aware of their statutory duties.

Staff are trained regularly on safeguarding matters, and this, along with regular updates, ensures that they are alert to any potential issues or indicators of harm. Staff are clear about what to do should they have any concerns, and show genuine care for pupils.

Pupils know the different forms that bullying can take and that staff will help them if they ever have concerns. They adamantly reported that they very rarely encounter any bullying at your school. One pupil said, 'There is absolutely none.' The school's records support the assertion by pupils that bullying is infrequent.

Inspection findings

- We agreed to focus on four areas of the school's work. The first of these concerned the impact of the school's strategies for reducing the absence rates of disadvantaged pupils. I also looked at how well leaders are tackling the persistent absence of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Information for the current and previous year shows that overall rates of attendance for disadvantaged pupils are improving. Consequently, the achievement of these pupils is also stronger. However, you rightly remain focused on improving their attendance further. The importance of good attendance is highlighted to pupils and parents continuously.
- You and the governing body have been robust in tackling persistent absence, particularly that of specific groups of pupils. As a result of your strong and direct leadership, there has been a significant fall in the number of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities who are

frequently absent. This improvement has been sustained over a substantial period. You provided examples of specific pupils within these two groups whose attendance has improved. You and governors have successfully communicated the importance of good attendance.

- The second focus of the inspection was the progress and attainment in reading of prior-middle-attaining pupils in key stage 1. There is a consistent approach to the teaching of phonics and reading across key stage 1. Consequently, prior-middle-attaining pupils use their phonics skills to decode unknown words accurately. Teachers' expectations have increased for this group of pupils because assessment information is used more effectively to plan next steps in learning. As a result, pupils' understanding and fluency in reading are improving rapidly.
- Pupils with average prior attainment are making good progress in reading. They read widely in many subjects. For example, pupils read a wealth of information books to research different topics. You are also helping them to develop a desire to read for pleasure. Teachers and support staff provide good strategies to enable pupils to understand what they read. When pupils do not understand a word, they are able to describe how they would find out its meaning, for example, by using a dictionary or a 'working wall'.
- The next area we agreed to look at was the progress of disadvantaged pupils in reading and writing in key stage 2. Disadvantaged pupils make good progress in writing because teachers are providing thoughtful opportunities for pupils to practise their skills through extended writing in English, history and religious education. There is also a strong focus on spelling and the use of good-quality texts to inspire pupils to write. As a result, the quality of pupils' written work is improving. We agreed, however, that there is scope to improve further by increasing the level of challenge in writing tasks. There are also times when teachers do not plan pupils' learning in enough detail. This means that there are times when learning opportunities do not build pupils skills systematically because they are not closely linked to each other. When this is the case, learning slows.
- Disadvantaged pupils, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, make rapid progress in reading from their different starting points and their attainment is rising quickly. Leaders assess pupils' achievement closely and drill down into their assessment information during pupils' progress meetings. As a result, disadvantaged pupils who begin to fall behind are spotted quickly. Support is swiftly put in place and is well matched to pupils' needs.
- Finally, I wanted to see how effective the school has been in raising progress and attainment in the reading of middle-attaining pupils in key stage 2. You have a detailed system in place to carefully track the progress of groups of pupils in reading. The school's assessment information shows that middle-attaining pupils make good progress. Texts and learning opportunities are accurately selected to interest and challenge this group of pupils, enabling them to become successful readers. Nearly all pupils from this group are reaching the expectations for their age and some are attaining above the expected standard.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers plan learning opportunities that enable pupils to develop their writing skills in a more systematic way
- teachers provide pupils with appropriate levels of challenge, so that their writing skills develop more rapidly.

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

Yours sincerely

Richard Blackmore
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short inspection, I met with you, members of your leadership team, teachers and governors. I spoke with a representative from the local authority. You and I visited classes to observe learning and looked at work in pupils' books. I met with pupils throughout the day and spoke with parents in the playground before school, and on the telephone. I considered the 53 responses made by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including the 22 free-text comments. I observed pupils' behaviour around the school and in the playground.

I reviewed safeguarding practice, including looking at the school's policies, procedures and record-keeping. I talked with you, other staff and governors about how the school ensures that pupils are kept safe. I also considered a range of other documentation, including school improvement planning and information about pupils' progress and attainment.