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Mrs Lysa Grieve  
Headteacher  
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Belford  
Northumberland  
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Dear Mrs Grieve

### **Short inspection of St Mary's Church of England Middle School**

Following my visit to the school on 21 November 2017 with Karen Gammack, Ofsted Inspector, 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 last inspection. Since your appointment, you have rapidly improved standards in the school. In spite of the many strengths of the school, you have maintained a vigorous focus on improving the quality of teaching in key stages 2 and 3. As a result, your determined, decisive and strategic actions have improved the quality of teaching rapidly, and current pupils are making stronger progress in a wide range of subjects, including writing and mathematics.

Despite the difficult circumstances the school community is facing, you have instilled a culture of high aspirations. Governors, staff, pupils and parents all share these high aspirations. Governors are skilled and reflective. They are aware of the strengths of the school, and what is working well. However, they are also aware of what can be further improved, for example the progress and attainment of low-prior-attaining boys. Governors are resolute in their determination to support you so that standards continually improve. You have earned the respect of the whole school community because of your determined approach to improve pupils' experiences and outcomes.

Pupils' attitudes and behaviour at St Mary's Church of England Middle School are truly exemplary. Pupils are enthusiastic and eager to learn. They concentrate hard on their work and they want to do well. When teachers use probing questions to challenge pupils and to make sure that pupils understand what they are learning, pupils confidently rise to the challenge. They are inquisitive and supportive of one

another. Pupils are assured in their ability because of strong relationships with each other and their teachers. Pupils are resilient and are sufficiently challenged in their learning. Pupils are friendly and respectful to each other, staff and visitors. Pupils speak of the school, the staff and their headteacher with immense and gushing pride. St Mary's Church of England Middle School is an inclusive school where all feel valued and respected. A smile is commonplace in the school and pupil and staff morale is high.

The previous inspection identified the need for leaders to further improve aspects of the quality of teaching in the school. Your rigorous monitoring is ensuring that you have an accurate and detailed understanding of where teaching is strongest and where additional support is required. You have introduced different approaches so that staff can support each other, for example joint planning sessions, particularly in mathematics. You have used support from local schools and this is providing opportunities for staff to share good practice, to develop confidence and expertise, and to learn from other specialist colleagues. Staff in the school support each other in their professional development. There is an ethos of support and teamwork so that pupils receive a high-quality education. The school has been supported well by the local authority and the diocese, both of which in difficult circumstances have provided both stability and support.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Pupils are well looked after and cared for by staff. Regular training has ensured that staff are vigilant in identifying and referring any concerns about children's welfare and safety. Records are detailed and of high quality. They show, for example, any identified issues, appropriate actions taken and any follow up completed by leaders. Attendance is above average overall and any absence is monitored carefully.

Pupils, of all ages, said that they feel safe in school and that they enjoy school. Pupils are well supervised and they know how to stay safe. Pupils spoke confidently about how to stay safe when using the internet, on their bikes and crossing the road. Pupils know what bullying is, but proudly said that there is none in the school. All pupils know whom they can talk to if they need support or advice.

Pupils work and play happily together and they speak highly of the 'value detectives' who are tasked with identifying pupils who have shown the values of respect, wisdom, community or hope throughout the week. Pupils also speak highly about the residential trip they attended in October. One boy enthusiastically said, 'It is the best thing I have ever done.'

### **Inspection findings**

- At the time of the previous inspection, leaders were tasked with further improving the quality of teaching. You have developed a thorough and regular process for checking on the quality of teaching, and, as a result, teaching is improving rapidly. You have planned opportunities for staff to share good practice and to plan collaboratively. Staff appreciate these opportunities because

they can share ideas, knowledge and subject expertise to improve their practice, although you have acknowledged that this needs to be as frequent as possible. Staff routinely challenge pupils to do better and extend their knowledge and understanding further. This is particularly the case in English and science.

- Achievement in mathematics and writing was also an area of focus for this inspection because pupils' progress by the end of key stage 2 in 2017, in these subjects, was below average. You recognised quickly that pupils' outcomes by the end of key stage 2 in mathematics and writing were not good enough. Therefore, swift actions to provide professional development opportunities for staff, intervention strategies you have planned for current pupils, and inspection evidence (including visits to classrooms and scrutinies of work in pupils' books) demonstrate that current pupils across the school are making strong progress from their different starting points in mathematics and in writing. Pupils benefit from planned opportunities to practise writing at length in a wide range of subjects, for example investigations in science and writing about Queen Elizabeth I in history. You have rightly identified that low-prior-attaining boys are currently not making the strong progress expected of them from their starting points. As a result, this is a priority for you and other staff.
- During the inspection, I also wanted to check how well pupils are doing in key stage 3. Pupils in key stage 3 are covering a broad and balanced curriculum in preparation for their transition to high school. Pupils are mature and are positive role models to the younger pupils in the school. They acquire knowledge, understanding and skills at a level appropriate to their ages. Inspection evidence, including visits to class and scrutinies of work in pupils' books, demonstrates that pupils are challenged in their learning and because of this are making strong progress, particularly in English, mathematics and science. Year 8 boys were particularly enthused and inquisitive in their science lesson as they explored the different functions of the human body. Also, effective questioning from the teacher probed and extended pupils' knowledge and understanding further.
- The vast majority of pupils attend school regularly. Pupils truly enjoy coming to school and being part of the school community. A minority of pupils are persistently absent, however. You have an in-depth understanding of these pupils' social, emotional and medical needs that form the barriers to them not attending as regularly as they should. As a result of this knowledge, you ensure that adequate support is in place so that pupils have every opportunity to catch up.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- the quality of teaching continues to be monitored with vigour, and they continue to provide staff with beneficial opportunities to learn from each other and colleagues from other schools
- improvements in low-prior-attaining boys' progress and attainment continue in both key stages.

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

Yours sincerely

Darren Stewart  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, a group of staff, governors, a representative from the diocese and the local authority. During meetings, we discussed the school's self-evaluation document, school development plan, pupils' current assessment information and current strategies to improve teaching and pupils' outcomes. The school's single central record was scrutinised and discussions took place about a wide range of safeguarding procedures, training and pupils' welfare and safety. Inspector visited lessons in key stages 2 and 3, and scrutinised work in a wide range of pupils' books in both key stages and across a wide range of subjects, particularly mathematics. Inspectors spoke to pupils both formally and informally to gain their views of the school and to hear some of them read. Inspectors also considered the results of Ofsted's online questionnaires.