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Mrs Frances Curless
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Curless

Short inspection of St Alban's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 14 December 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 last inspection. You have a long-standing association with the school and have overseen significant improvements over the last decade. In tandem with governors and other leaders, you have ensured that the school has continued to grow since the previous inspection. You have attached great significance to developing each and every member of staff. This has empowered your colleagues to develop as teachers and leaders. For example, you have supported teachers to become capable subject coordinators. You have also encouraged teaching assistants to lead on the delivery of important strategies to support pupils who need extra help. Pupils who speak English as an additional language, and those who experience difficulties with speech and language development, benefit from excellent support.

You have based the school's mission statement on the views of pupils. This statement reflects the importance that all members of the community attach to doing their best, working hard, and caring for each other and the wider world. Your team has established an ethos in which diversity is promoted and celebrated. For example, the school holds a multicultural Christmas fair. You also stage events that provide families with the opportunity to share features of their own cultures with others. Parents are supportive of the school's work. Typical comments from parents include: 'I cannot speak highly enough about the care my children receive from staff' and 'The work my child receives continues to be achievable yet challenging.' Pupils enjoy their time at the school. When I met with a group of pupils, they all said that they would rate the school as nine or 10 out of 10. Pupils are inspired to

enjoy learning and they speak highly of the teaching they receive across the curriculum.

The staff are overwhelmingly positive about working at the school. They take inspiration from how 'kind-hearted the pupils are' and are proud to have created an ethos in which 'pupils are so accepting of each other'. They are grateful to leaders for the faith that is placed in them and the consideration that is shown for their well-being.

Your team has built on many of the school's established strengths. The school's exemplary approach to developing pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural understanding has been enhanced by a thorough approach to promoting British values. For example, pupils have spoken with the local MP. They have also taken part in workshops delivered by representatives from the Houses of Parliament Education Centre. Pupils have continued to benefit from excellent teaching in mathematics. Children in the early years have continued to benefit from a range of opportunities that enable them to make a successful start to life at St Alban's. Furthermore, pupils who are new to the country and/or speak English as an additional language have continued to make excellent progress under the school's careful guidance.

You have a balanced, perceptive and nuanced understanding of the school's effectiveness and its context. Leaders monitor the quality of all aspects of the school's work closely, and this provides them with a clear oversight of the school's strengths and what needs to improve. You have successfully addressed areas of relative weakness. For example, you have significantly improved attendance throughout the school and your team has orchestrated improvements to the quality of teaching in key stage 1. Governors have an equally clear vision of the school's strengths and what needs to be done next. They are ambitious for the school and hold leaders to account for all aspects of the school's work. They have challenged you to improve areas of relative weakness and they have ensured that priority is given to the development of the whole curriculum.

You have successfully addressed the areas for improvement that were identified during the last inspection. You have improved the school's systems for tracking pupils' achievement. You carefully track pupils' progress against specific and graduated criteria. As a result, leaders are able to identify which pupils require additional support to consolidate their learning. You have also introduced a broader range of strategies to ensure that pupils read regularly at home. For example, you have introduced an online reading programme that is used by pupils and their families. You have also introduced new ways of communicating with parents about the reading their children do at home. You have ensured that the most able pupils are challenged to make fast progress in mathematics. Central to this improvement has been the implementation of a new mathematics curriculum that challenges pupils to engage deeply with different mathematical concepts and processes. Despite this, teachers do not consistently have high expectations of what the most able pupils can achieve in other areas of the curriculum. They do not routinely provide them with the careful balance between support and challenge that would

enable them to make more rapid gains in their learning.

You are keen for the school to keep improving. Your plans to improve the school are broad and ambitious. Impressively, your current plans prioritise the areas for improvement that I have identified during the inspection. In particular, you recognise that teachers are not consistently providing pupils of different abilities with the precise support needed for them to make faster progress with their writing. Furthermore, you acknowledge that further improvements are still needed to teaching in key stage 1 to further quicken the progress pupils make.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have created a culture in which all members of staff take their safeguarding responsibilities seriously. You have a clear understanding of the safeguarding risks that are potentially more prevalent within the local area. You reduce these risks by building positive relationships with parents and by making sure that relevant staff are hyper-vigilant to any changes in the behaviour or mood of potentially vulnerable pupils. You also understand the safeguarding implications of high rates of absence. Indeed, your strategy for improving attendance has been underpinned by a desire to reduce the risks associated with pupils having regular and/or sustained periods off school.

You undertake useful work with pupils to help them develop the knowledge and skills to manage risk. For example, you have done a lot of work on road safety. You have also ensured that pupils develop an age-appropriate understanding of what constitutes healthy relationships. Staff work in partnership with parents to keep children safe, particularly in relation to e-safety.

Leaders have ensured that all staff undertake regular safeguarding training. They refer concerns, as appropriate, to leaders. You have ensured that all safeguarding records are precise and fit for purpose. You work effectively with a range of external partners to keep pupils safe.

Inspection findings

- The inspection followed a number of lines of enquiry. The first of these looked at how effectively you have addressed the issue of high and increasing absence. You explained how you have put into action broad plans to improve attendance. For example, you have stopped authorising holidays during term time. You work closely with the local authority to support and challenge those families whose children regularly have time off school. You monitor attendance closely and you have ensured that the importance of good attendance is promoted relentlessly.
- You have changed the culture towards attendance among the school community. Pupils are keen to attend regularly. They speak with enthusiasm about the rewards they receive for good attendance, such as the extended playtime for the class with the best weekly attendance. As a result, you have dramatically improved attendance. Rates of absence reduced by 1.5% during the last academic year, and the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from

school has more than halved. For the first time in many years, attendance figures are now in line with national averages.

- A second line of enquiry considered how effectively teaching is supporting pupils to make rapid progress in their writing. You explained how you have focused on the development of writing in recent years. You showed your current plans to improve the school, which continue to prioritise improvement in this area. Leaders have worked creatively and resourcefully to make incremental improvements to the teaching of writing over time. You have continued to focus on the development of pupils' speaking and listening skills to lay the foundations for better writing. Leaders have also introduced new ways of teaching writing throughout the school. To support this, teachers have undertaken training to develop different aspects of their practice, such as how to model what good writing looks like.
- As a result of these efforts, leaders are beginning to secure improvements in writing outcomes. In 2017, for example, far more pupils in Year 2 attained the expected and higher standards in writing compared with the previous academic year. Teachers have increased their expectations of pupils' writing. Teachers are also providing pupils with regular opportunities to write for a variety of different audiences and purposes across the broader curriculum.
- Despite these efforts, you are still frustrated by the discrepancy that remains between pupils' attainment and progress in writing compared with reading and mathematics. In particular, there are very few pupils who attain the higher standards in writing throughout the school. Teachers sometimes lack the knowledge and skills to support pupils to achieve the higher standards in writing. Furthermore, low-ability pupils do not often receive the careful support that is needed to secure sustained improvements to the technical accuracy of their writing.
- Finally, we looked at whether pupils are continuing to make faster progress in key stage 1. You explained how you used the disappointment of the 2016 key stage 1 outcomes as a catalyst for improving teaching. The deputy headteacher has orchestrated a number of improvements to the quality of teaching in key stage 1. She has improved the use of information about pupils' progress to make sure that pupils who need additional help are well supported. She has also set higher expectations for staff, so that they plan work for pupils that is better matched to their starting points.
- As a result of these changes, pupils are continuing to make significantly faster progress throughout key stage 1. The 2017 key stage 1 outcomes demonstrated that more pupils achieved the expected and higher standards in reading, writing and mathematics. Despite these successes, you are keen to make further improvements. In particular, you are aware that levels of attainment are still below national averages.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers provide pupils of all abilities with the careful support needed to further develop the fluency and technical accuracy of their writing
- teachers have particularly high expectations of what the most able pupils can achieve and provide these pupils with work that consistently challenges them to make rapid gains in their learning
- recent improvements to teaching in key stage 1 are built on, so that pupils make even faster progress across the curriculum.

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

Yours sincerely

Will Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and other leaders. I also met with members of the governing body. I spoke with the school's improvement partner and representatives from the local authority and archdiocese. I met formally with a group of pupils and talked informally with others around school. I met formally with a group of staff, which included teachers and teaching assistants.

Leaders accompanied me on visits to classes, where I observed teaching and learning in a range of subjects. I also looked at work produced by pupils throughout the school in English, humanities and religious education.

I examined a range of documentation, including that relating to safeguarding. In addition, I scrutinised a range of policies, and the school's improvement plan and self-evaluation report. I also looked at the school's website.

As part of the inspection, I considered 24 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire. I also looked at 20 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire and 13 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. Eleven comments from parents received by Ofsted's free-text facility were also considered.