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Mrs Allison Robson
Headteacher
St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, South Moor
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Dear Mrs Robson

Short inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, South Moor

Following my visit to the school on 8 February 2018, 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 March 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Since your appointment in January 2017, you have worked tirelessly to improve aspects of the school's performance. You recognised that standards had declined in the school since the previous inspection. Working in partnership with the local authority, your rapid action to improve teaching has led, in a short time, to notable improvements in pupils' achievement in some areas of the curriculum. Pupils' attainment in the Year 1 phonics screening check has increased sharply from below average and is now in line with the national average. The standards attained by pupils in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of key stage 1 have increased significantly from well below average in 2016 to in line with the national averages in 2017. You are honest about what you have achieved so far, but also about what still needs to improve in the school so that all pupils achieve as well as they can.

You have strengthened the school's successful work to foster the personal, social, spiritual and emotional development of pupils. Parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school, noting that communication between home and school has improved and that they enjoy greater opportunities to get involved in school life. They are particularly appreciative of the concern that is shown, by you and your staff, for every pupil. As one parent stated, 'The teachers and leadership team have a passionate, caring approach,

which is reflected in every aspect of school life.' Pupils are enthusiastic learners, behave well and speak warmly about the help they receive from staff. They show concern for others. They were keen to tell me about their fundraising work and how much the older pupils enjoy taking care of the youngest children. Pupils take pride in their successes and have responded well to your strategies to improve attendance. As a result, absence and persistent absence are now below the national average.

You have the full support of your staff, who appreciate your efforts to help them to develop their practice. You have clarified the role of middle leaders, providing more opportunities for them to get involved in checking the work of other staff and improving the quality of teaching. This work is beginning to bear fruit, but there is more to do to ensure that all leaders share your high expectations for the achievement of pupils.

You have taken significant steps to improve the quality of provision for children in the early years. This is beginning to make a difference to children's progress. In particular, progress in reading and writing has accelerated. However, teaching is not yet consistently securing the faster progress needed so that more children can catch up to, or exceed, the expected standard by the end of the Reception Year.

The standards attained by pupils by the end of key stage 2 have fluctuated since the previous inspection. Teaching has not consistently enabled pupils to make strong progress. You have begun to address this. As a result, standards in mathematics rose for pupils in Year 6 in 2017 and a broadly average proportion reached the expected standard for their age. However, this better teaching in mathematics is not yet consistent across key stage 2. Similarly, pupils' progress in reading and writing is variable. Consequently, in some year groups, attainment remains low and is not yet improving quickly enough. This is particularly the case for some disadvantaged pupils and those with the potential to attain at the highest standards. You and your governing body are aware of what needs to improve and have plans in place to address these issues.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that arrangements to safeguard pupils are fit for purpose. Staff have received the training they need so that everyone is clear about their roles and responsibilities in keeping pupils safe. Appropriate records are maintained of the school's work to support the most vulnerable pupils. Leaders engage readily with other agencies where pupils may be at risk of harm.

The school's curriculum supports pupils to take personal responsibility for their safety. Pupils confidently advised me on the risks associated with using the internet and the actions they take to keep themselves safe. They know they must not share personal information online or communicate with strangers.

Pupils assured me that bullying is rare and that staff would support them should any issues arise. All parents and pupils who responded to the inspection questionnaires indicated that pupils feel safe in school.

Inspection findings

- Your work to improve the quality of teaching has been particularly successful in key stage 1. The introduction of a new approach to the teaching of phonics has ensured that the large majority of pupils are confident early readers. Teachers and other adults have increasingly high expectations of the quality of work that pupils produce. A relentless focus on basic skills is making sure that, from the earliest stage, more pupils are confident with their knowledge of numbers and are developing well-formed handwriting. Pupils' books and your own assessment information show that progress is strong and standards are rising across key stage 1.
- A new system of assessment has ensured that staff have a clearer understanding of what pupils need to do in order to meet and exceed the expected standards for their age. This is enabling some teachers to plan work which is better matched to pupils' needs and, as a result, pupils' progress is accelerating. However, pupils' workbooks show that this is not consistent in all subjects and in all year groups. In some year groups, tasks are too easy for the most able pupils, or fail to get to the heart of the gaps in pupils' knowledge and skills. This is especially the case in key stage 2 in writing, where pupils' previous low attainment is not being addressed well enough. Many pupils have not mastered the basic skills of spelling, punctuation and grammar and this is hampering their progress. You know this is an area that needs to be improved and you are commissioning support from the local authority to help to address it.
- The standards achieved by children in the early years have improved over time but remain below the national average. You have taken swift action to improve the quality of the learning environment so that children have access to a wide range of learning resources. Children now have more opportunities to develop their creative skills and to use their imagination. Role play is used, alongside specifically targeted additional support, to help children to develop their oral communication skills. Systematic teaching of phonics and writing is resulting in better achievement for children. While teaching has improved, it is not yet consistently securing the stronger progress that is needed so that children catch up quickly. Leaders also recognise that some children could be challenged further to exceed the expected standards for their age by the end of the Reception Year.
- You and the deputy headteacher have reviewed the curriculum for mathematics. As a result of training and external support, teachers now have a better understanding of the mastery approach to mathematics. In particular, 'real life' mathematics weeks have been successful in helping pupils to understand the purpose of mathematics. The teaching of mathematics is skilful in some classes. During the inspection, Year 6 pupils, for example, benefited from the deputy headteacher's precise explanations and questions, enabling them to articulate their mathematical reasoning confidently when solving complex problems. Their workbooks show that this effective teaching is typical and is enabling them to make stronger progress. However, for some pupils in key stage 2, progress in mathematics slows because the work set for them does not challenge their thinking or understanding sufficiently. Too often, pupils repeatedly practise simple calculations, rather than applying their skills routinely to solve tricky problems.

- Leaders have refreshed the curriculum for teaching reading. Teachers now have clear guidelines on what is expected of them when they teach reading skills to small groups of pupils. The quality of teaching is being more closely checked to ensure that it is securing better progress from pupils. Pupils speak positively about reading and the range of books on offer to them. Assessment information shows that pupils' progress in reading is beginning to accelerate. Leaders have correctly identified that pupils need further opportunities to develop their ability to infer information from the text that they read so that they can reach the highest standard of attainment.
- Since your arrival, you have prioritised the importance of sharing leadership across the school. Middle leaders are clearer about their roles. Most are now involved in observing lessons or reviewing teachers' planning and pupils' work so that they have a better understanding of the quality of teaching. You are working alongside middle leaders to ensure that their assessments of teaching are accurate and they value this support. However, some are not taking full responsibility, yet, for improving the aspects that they lead. Some do not have high enough expectations of the quality of teaching and the outcomes that pupils are capable of achieving. You recognise that this is an area that requires further development so that all middle leaders fulfil their roles to best effect.
- Governors recognise that, historically, they did not have a sufficiently strong understanding of the school's performance. More recently, they have accessed more detailed information. They are clearer about what is working well and what needs to be improved. Governors are regular visitors to the school. They are proactive in seeking external advice to help them in their role. Governors have recently commissioned a review of governance from the local authority to enable them to enhance their effectiveness.
- You keep a very close check on the progress and attainment of vulnerable pupils and use this information to hold staff to account for their performance. Where underachievement is identified, pupils are receiving additional support more rapidly to help them to catch up. During the inspection, I was particularly impressed with the teaching assistants who were working with small groups of pupils. In all cases, they provided helpful guidance and support, but did not allow pupils to become over-reliant on their assistance. The coordinator for special educational needs (SEN) reviews the impact of additional support and you are unafraid to make changes where it is not securing the desired effect. The progress of disadvantaged pupils and those with SEN and/or disabilities is improving, particularly for pupils in key stage 1. However, you are aware that some disadvantaged pupils in key stage 2 are not achieving as well as they can because teaching is not always well matched to their needs.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching across key stage 2 enables pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, to make more rapid progress in reading, writing and mathematics so that a higher proportion reach and exceed the expected standards for their age
- a higher proportion of children make more rapid progress to reach and exceed the

expected standard for their age by the end of the Reception Year

- all middle leaders develop the skills they need to play a full role in improving the quality of teaching and the outcomes achieved by pupils in their areas of responsibility.

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

Yours sincerely

Claire Brown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection, I met with you and other members of the leadership team. I conducted discussions with a group of governors and a representative of the local authority and spoke with the deputy diocesan director of education by telephone. I visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning jointly with you. I spoke to pupils during their lessons, at break time and met with a group of pupils from key stage 2. I reviewed examples of pupils' work. You presented information detailing pupils' achievement, the school self-evaluation document, the school development plan and your arrangements for checking the work of teachers. Documents relating to your work to safeguard pupils were checked. I reviewed the information and policies on the school's website. I considered the 28 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View), 37 responses by pupils to the inspection questionnaire and 18 responses to the staff questionnaire.