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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



15 February 2018

Mr Christopher Metcalfe
Headteacher
St Margaret's CofE Voluntary Aided Primary School
School Road
Orford
Warrington
Cheshire
WA2 9AD

Dear Mr Metcalfe

Short inspection of St Margaret's CofE Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 23 January 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 September 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The school's mission statement aptly summarises the distinctive character and nature of the school's ethos. Your commitment to care for pupils, challenge them, celebrate their achievements and raise their aspirations and ambitions are a hallmark of the school's work. You lead well the drive to provide pupils with worthwhile learning experiences to improve their life chances and enable them to become responsible citizens. You have established a genuine learning culture for pupils and staff. You expect staff to be reflective practitioners, committed to improving their professional practice. The staff coaching programme that you have created ensures that there is a continual focus on improving teaching and learning. It also effectively develops leaders across the school. Staff are encouraged to be adventurous with new and innovative teaching strategies. Leaders frequently check the impact of those teaching strategies on pupils' learning and progress to ensure that they are effective.

The judicious recruitment and deployment decisions made by you and your governors have ensured that leadership and accountability are distributed more evenly across the team. This has increased the school's capacity for further improvement. Rigorous self-evaluation is a strength of leadership and governance. A well-informed and astute board of governors plays a constructive role in ongoing school improvement by providing leaders with strong challenge and effective support. Governors arrange external reviews of their effectiveness and undertake training to ensure that they are well equipped for their role. They review

information about the school's performance frequently and ask pertinent questions about the achievement of key groups, such as disadvantaged pupils, the most able and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. Governors have good strategies to check that the school's safeguarding systems work well in practice.

Leaders have built upon many of the strengths identified at the previous inspection, including by further improving teaching and learning. Since that time, a new national curriculum has been introduced and pupils are now expected to attain higher standards by the end of both key stages. Nevertheless, in the 2017 statutory tests and assessments, Year 6 pupils and Year 2 pupils made good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Moreover, the proportion of pupils attaining the higher standards and greater depth in those subjects increased again. As such, leaders have successfully addressed the last inspection's recommendation to improve outcomes in reading. However, they recognise that, although improving, more work still needs to be done to develop pupils' skills in phonics by the end of Year 1.

As part of the priority to improve Year 1 pupils' standards in phonics, leaders have rightly looked at the effectiveness of teaching in the early years. When you provided the most recent information about the proportion of children achieving a good level of development in the early years, it was clear that standards had dipped. That said, a notable proportion of children begin the early years with knowledge and skills below what is typical for their age, particularly in communication and language. You have already begun to take effective action in this area. For example, the practice that we observed in the early years was strong. Children were fully engaged in a wide range of interesting activities and sustaining good concentration. Adults' interactions with children supported and extended their learning well. The characteristics of effective early learning were very evident. Nonetheless, you acknowledge the need to increase the proportion of children who achieve a good level of development by the end of the early years.

Leaders have secured some significant improvements in disadvantaged pupils' achievement. Although the overall proportion of children attaining a good level of development dipped in 2017, the proportion of disadvantaged children attaining this standard improved significantly. Particularly impressive was the improvement in disadvantaged pupils' writing in the 2017 Year 2 statutory teacher assessments. Pupils attained higher standards in writing than other non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. In reading and mathematics, their standards were close to those of all pupils nationally. Disadvantaged pupils also achieved well in the 2017 Year 6 statutory reading and mathematics tests. Their progress in these subjects was above average. Considerably more disadvantaged pupils than in previous years left Year 6 well prepared for secondary school.

Pupils are proud of their school. They say that the teachers are kind and friendly and make sure that they understand their work. Pupils identified various subjects as favourites, but mathematics was top of the list for many. Comments in relation to the extra-curricular activities included 'brilliant' and 'something for everyone'. Most

described behaviour as good. Pupils showed very good awareness of diversity and the importance of respecting difference. One pupil's comment: 'Don't judge people on their looks, how they dress, act or speak – it's what they're like on the inside that counts,' summarised the views of many.

Parents have great confidence in the leadership of the school and were fulsome in their praise of the school's work. All who completed the online survey said that they would recommend the school to other parents.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Procedures to check on the eligibility of staff and visitors to be around pupils are thorough and effective. Staff are vigilant and know what to do if they have concerns about a pupil's safety and welfare. Designated safeguarding leaders work closely with parents and professionals. They are relentless in pursuing any concerns to ensure that pupils receive the support they need. Pupils say that they feel safe and have a good understanding of how to keep safe, including when using the internet. They have a clear understanding of what constitutes bullying and the different forms bullying can take. The pupils with whom I spoke said that this type of behaviour is rare. They trust the adults in the school to look after them.

Inspection findings

- A line of enquiry for the inspection was the significant improvement in Year 6 pupils' achievement in the 2017 statutory tests and assessments. This was particularly the case for pupils who had attained average standards at the end of key stage 1. You and your leadership team were able to demonstrate well the factors underpinning the improvements. Incisive records of classroom observations and scrutiny of pupils' work show that strong and effective teaching is a key reason. Another is leaders' frequent and rigorous checks on pupils' progress from teachers' assessments. Leaders make good use of this information to decide if staff need to support or challenge pupils more to accelerate their progress. The samples of work and assessment information that leaders provided to show the progress of current pupils reflect the continuing positive impact of teaching and strategic leadership decisions on pupils' learning.
- Another focus was the significant rise in standards of disadvantaged pupils in the most recent Year 2 statutory assessments. The factors that promote good progress for the majority of pupils are similarly pertinent for disadvantaged pupils. Additionally, you have deployed a senior leader to champion the achievement of pupils in this group. This reflects the importance that you and governors give to ensuring that disadvantaged pupils reach their potential. You ensure that all teaching and pastoral staff know the part they play in enabling disadvantaged pupils to overcome barriers that impede their learning. Your well-thought-out strategy for using the pupil premium is underpinned by a detailed action plan. This focuses on accelerating pupils' progress, including that of the most able disadvantaged pupils, to ensure that they reach at least the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics. Last year, the school's work to

increase disadvantaged pupils' attendance and reduce persistent absence was very effective. The only area in which disadvantaged pupils did not attain as well as they might was in the Year 1 phonics screening check.

- Pupils' below-average attainment in the Year 1 phonics screening check was a line of enquiry for the inspection. You have taken decisive action to improve outcomes in this respect. This includes an increased focus on teaching phonics in the early years. You have made some changes to staffing and ensured that all staff involved in teaching phonics have refreshed their training. Changes have also been made to the organisation of phonics teaching. You have found that this is enabling staff to match work more closely to their assessments of pupils' needs and move learning on more quickly. The early years leader has increased the number of phonics challenges for children to complete during the day. Senior leaders regularly and rigorously review the quality of phonics teaching. Another layer of quality assurance and expertise has been achieved by the early years leader joining the Reception classes each day to teach phonics alongside Reception staff. The phonics workshops that have been held for parents to enable them to support their children's learning in this aspect of reading have been well received. During the inspection we observed very effective teaching of phonics in the early years and Year 1. Staff demonstrated strong subject knowledge. They taught the skills of blending and segmenting sounds well. They ensure that pupils are gaining a good understanding of tricky words that cannot be sounded out correctly. As a result of these actions, the school's assessment information is already showing an improvement in pupils' phonics skills when compared to this time last year.
- My final line of enquiry was about the school's curriculum and how well it prepares pupils for life in modern Britain. Your passion for and commitment to providing pupils with a broad, inspiring and innovative curriculum is shared by staff and governors. The school's website, pupils' views, their work and displays around the school show that your aim is well met. Pupils receive a very good grounding in all national curriculum subjects. Their learning is enlivened by teachers' creativity in planning work that captures their imagination and takes account of their interests. Humanities, arts, science and computing all have a high profile across the school. These subjects incorporate meaningful opportunities to reinforce learning in literacy and numeracy. Physical education and personal, social and health education focus pupils on developing healthy bodies and minds. Innovative practice, such as the 'Bold Careers and Aspirations' week, enterprise activities and the employability feature that you are developing, gives pupils an early and invaluable insight into the world of work. A wide range of extra-curricular clubs, before and after school and at lunchtime, further enrich the curriculum.
- From the early years upwards, some excellent work is done to ensure that pupils understand the principles of the fundamental British values. The curriculum enables pupils to develop an increasingly mature appreciation of the worth of diversity and the importance of equality. They learn about diverse cultural and religious traditions, diverse families and relationships and important ideas such as stereotyping and discrimination, including by disability. Work on these ideas is carefully planned as part of the ongoing curriculum and reinforced in special

celebratory days and weeks. The recent early years nativity play, in which children chose their own roles, epitomised the school's approach particularly well. There were a number of 'Josephs' and 'Marys', with boys and girls filling both roles, and only two kings because only two children wanted to be kings. In all, the school is doing a very effective job in preparing pupils for life in modern Britain.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the proportion of pupils attaining the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics screening check at least equals the national average
- by the end of Reception, the proportion of children attaining a good level of development at least equals or is much closer to the national average.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese 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

Margot D'Arcy
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and members of your senior leadership team to discuss the school's evaluation of its work and priorities for improvement. I met with five governors and a representative of the local authority. I reviewed a range of school documents, including those relating to safeguarding and behaviour. I considered samples of pupils' work, assessment information and displays. Accompanied by senior leaders, I observed learning and behaviour in a sample of lessons. I listened to some pupils read. I held a formal discussion with pupils from key stage 2 and spoke to others informally at lunchtime. I spoke to a number of parents as they brought their children to school. I took account of 19 responses to Ofsted's online parent survey, including seven written comments. I also considered the responses to a recent school survey of 195 parents. I reviewed 29 responses to the online pupil survey and 38 responses to the online staff survey.