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Mrs Bozena Laraway  
Headteacher  
St Helen's Catholic Junior School Academy  
Sawyers Hall Lane  
Brentwood  
Essex  
CM15 9BY

Dear Mrs Laraway

### **Short inspection of St Helen's Catholic Junior School**

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 July 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 provides a happy and vibrant learning environment in which pupils feel safe, are well cared for, and are encouraged to do their very best. Pupils are exceptionally well mannered and articulate. They politely step aside to let adults pass through doors first, routinely greet and welcome visitors to their school, and show great kindness and support towards one another.

Most parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, expressed positive views about the school. One parent wrote, 'I have two children at the school. Both are happy and enjoy attending school.' A significant minority, however, expressed less positive views in their free-text comments. You communicate regularly with parents and carers by means of detailed newsletters and through your website. Nevertheless, some parents continue to have negative perceptions, even when these may be unfounded.

Pupils enjoy coming to school. They actively participate in a wide range of clubs and activities. Music and sporting activities are particularly popular. The curriculum is broad and balanced and you employ specialist teachers for music, Mandarin Chinese and French. Pupils are also encouraged to develop their leadership skills through a wide range of roles and responsibilities. These include the school council, being elected as head boy or girl, prefects and acting as playground buddies. The school's Catholic values are modelled very well by pupils, and these link closely to

fundamental British values, which pupils know and understand well.

Pupils typically make good progress from their starting points over time. This is undoubtedly due to the effective teaching they experience and their willingness to learn. Progress made by pupils at the end of key stage 2 in 2017 was, however, inconsistent for some groups and subjects. Whereas progress made in reading and writing was reasonable, pupils made below-average progress in mathematics. You are aware of the challenges you face relating to progress, and have included strategies in your school improvement planning to address them.

The governing body has a number of members who are fairly new to their role. In light of this, the chair of the governing body has plans to commission a review of governance imminently in order to identify existing skills and any gaps in knowledge. Governors are clearly willing and committed, but minutes of their meetings do not reflect the high degree of challenge which is an essential part of their role.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The school's arrangements for safeguarding are effective. Leaders responded quickly to one issue relating to staff suitability checks, and diligently rectified the matter before the inspector left the school site. All staff have been issued with the necessary documentation relating to safeguarding. The safeguarding policy is up to date, and is being implemented effectively.

Records relating to pupils who may be at risk are well maintained, and details of actions taken and any resolution are logged appropriately. Pupils say that they feel safe when in school, and that they would always approach a member of staff if they experience any problems.

### **Inspection findings**

- You have included the areas for improvement identified at the time of your previous inspection in the school's improvement plans. You have rightly identified actions to respond to these areas, and governors are monitoring the impact of these actions.
- Teachers now have a progress-related target as part of their performance management measure. This ensures that the emphasis on pupils' progress is highlighted, with particular reference to different groups of pupils. Senior and middle leaders drop in on lesson planning meetings, and senior leaders conduct demonstration lessons to model effective practice. Class teachers find this useful.
- Teachers' planning for learning takes account of the different needs of pupils in the class. Pupils are actively encouraged to choose tasks with an appropriate degree of challenge, according to their prior attainment. They say that they would never go for the 'easy option'.
- Pupils' progress in mathematics was below average at the end of key stage 2 in 2017. You now group pupils according to ability in Years 5 and 6, and have

added an additional group in both years to meet the needs of pupils with low prior attainment. You have devised your own mathematics curriculum using a 'mastery' approach, against which pupils are tested regularly.

- Pupils with both low and high prior attainment are provided with extra mathematics sessions through 'time out' groups. This additional provision is demonstrating improvement in the current progress made by pupils. The results of your regular practice national curriculum tests in mathematics suggest that a higher proportion of pupils are achieving the expected standard in Year 6. Pupils in Years 3 to 5 regularly recite their times tables to music and undergo weekly times table tests. Every mathematics lesson includes a few minutes revising basic skills. This is now school policy and is non-negotiable.
- Although you have a low proportion of disadvantaged pupils in the school compared to national figures, these pupils underachieved in reading in 2017, making progress which was well below the national figure for non-disadvantaged pupils.
- I listened to eight disadvantaged pupils read from books of their choice. Many read with fluency and expression, but a few struggled with unfamiliar words. All declared a love of reading and acknowledged its importance in preparing them for the next stages of their education.
- Teachers have a context sheet which outlines the individual needs of disadvantaged pupils in their class. These pupils feature in targeted work with either the teacher or the teaching assistant. They are also provided with one-to-one support sessions, invited to attend the in-school homework club and continue to be taught phonics as long as is required.
- I looked closely at the reasons for the increase in pupils' persistent absence, which rose from 4.7% in 2016 to 5.9% in 2017. I was concerned because, although the school's figures remain below the national average for persistent absence, the national figure fell slightly in 2017.
- The school has strong systems in place to monitor the attendance of all pupils and quickly makes contact with home on a pupil's first day of absence, should no reason be provided by the parent.
- The school's attendance officer provided convincing evidence to explain why pupils' persistent absence increased last year by going through each pupil in turn who contributed towards the increase. The school celebrates pupils who have 100% attendance by awarding certificates in assemblies and constantly conveys the message that regular attendance is linked to strong achievement. Current attendance data shows that the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent has reduced.

## **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the strong focus on improving pupils' progress in mathematics continues
- strategies to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils continue to be evaluated for impact, particularly with regard to reading skills
- further work is carried out to engage those parents who have negative perceptions of the school and its work
- the governing body responds swiftly to the findings of the commissioned external review of governance, and governors pose an appropriate degree of challenge to senior leaders through their questioning.

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

Yours sincerely

John Daniell  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

I met with you, the assistant headteacher and a group of middle leaders, to discuss progress since the previous inspection. I met with the chair of the governing body to gain his views on the school. I also spoke on the telephone with a representative of the local authority, as well as meeting with groups of pupils who read to me and showed me examples of their work.

I scrutinised a variety of sources of information, including your self-evaluation summary document, the school's plans for improvement, and assessment information for all year groups. I held a meeting to examine the school's safeguarding and child protection procedures, the records of checks that leaders make on the suitability of staff to work with children and information relating to attendance.

I undertook joint observations of learning across the school, viewed work in pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their learning when visiting lessons. I took account of the views of 16 staff who responded to Ofsted's online survey. I also considered the 79 responses by parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.