

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



15 May 2018

Miss Sarah Gilliver
Interim Headteacher
St Mary's Voluntary Controlled Church of England Junior School
Heath Drive
Ware
Hertfordshire
SG12 0RL

Dear Miss Gilliver

Short inspection of St Mary's Voluntary Controlled Church of England Junior School

Following my visit to the school on 1 May 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 June 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Since becoming the school's interim headteacher in September 2017, you, and your senior staff, have ensured that the school has moved forward significantly. You are highly ambitious and have high expectations of yourself and your staff. As a result, the drive for continued improvement is evident throughout the school. The school is now better placed to maintain the good standard of education because of the work that has taken place since your appointment.

Your development plan is detailed and focused. It identifies clear priorities for further improvement in order to achieve excellence. You are determined to boost the progress of disadvantaged pupils even further so that they can reach the highest standards. You demonstrate resolve and tenacity, ensuring that every child can make progress no matter how small their steps.

You and your leadership team regularly review the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. As a result, you accurately identify the areas for improvement, which is evidenced through your self-evaluation and school development plan. You and your leaders identify ways in which to make the improvements, including using skills both from within the staff team and commissioning external support. For example, you have commissioned support from the local authority's English support team.

You create a warm, bright and engaging school environment for pupils. You and your staff have thoughtful and caring interactions with pupils, which are underpinned by the school motto, 'enjoying our learning together'.

The learning environment reflects the broad and balanced curriculum you insist is every child's entitlement. You provide rich learning opportunities for all pupils. Pupils talk enthusiastically about studying subjects such as science, geography and art. The reading you have introduced ensures exposure to a variety of quality novels and texts which pupils enjoy studying. These texts both challenge and interest them. There is an exciting buzz of learning across the school. As a result, pupils are making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. An increasing number are exceeding national expectations and working at greater depth.

Governors value your openness. They fully support the drive for excellence. They have a wide range of experience and extensive skills to draw upon. Governors make the most of every opportunity to visit the school and work with leaders. They check things out for themselves and understand their statutory responsibilities. As a result, they support and challenge effectively.

Pupils are well behaved, polite and want to learn. They cooperate and get on well with each other. They have well-formed views and opinions but are also able to listen carefully to one another. They show tolerance and respect to all. The school is a calm and welcoming place to learn.

Parents are positive about the work you do with their children. One parent commented, 'St Mary's really cares about educating the whole child.' Views such as 'Both my children settled well into St Mary's and are doing extremely well academically' and 'I strongly recommend this school; my child has made excellent progress since being here' are typical of the many positive comments offered by parents.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your leadership team have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You are very aware of your duties in relation to safeguarding pupils. Records of pupils who have been identified as needing support from external agencies are detailed and include the actions that the school takes to keep pupils safe.

Staff training is up to date and records are frequently checked. Staff, including non-teaching staff, are fully aware of what to do if they have any concerns. Everyone in school is committed to providing the right level of early help for families to ensure that pupils are safe and protect their well-being. You know all pupils well and you have built strong, trusting relationships with families.

Your spiritual, moral, social and cultural curriculum helps pupils learn how to have respect for one another. They learn how to reduce incidents of bullying and how to be responsible citizens in a safe society. For example, you give pupils effective

lessons on how to use the internet. Pupils said that they feel confident who they should turn to if they are worried about anything. Your governors check and challenge you on your safeguarding procedures and they, too, are committed to safeguarding as the school's top priority.

Inspection findings

- My first key line of enquiry to establish if the school remains good focused on the school's work to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. We discussed pupils' progress in writing and how you are ensuring that progress is positive across the school. The school's own assessment information shows that current pupils are making better-than-expected progress in writing from their starting points when they are assessed on entry into Year 3. Evidence in workbooks supports this information and pupils are making rapid progress in several year groups.
- I was also interested to see how well teachers plan tasks that meet the needs of the pupils to ensure that progress is positive. In the majority of classes, work is carefully matched to the pupils so that they receive tasks that allow them to build on skills previously taught. Pupils are challenged appropriately, using skilful questions and tasks. For example, Year 5 pupils were calculating percentages of numbers from 20% to 63%. This task effectively challenged the most able and those requiring more support.
- My second line of enquiry was to monitor the steps taken by senior leaders to stop the decline in pupils' progress in reading and mathematics. Since September 2017, the school's own assessment information and analysis of workbooks show that current pupils are making strong progress across most year groups. Leaders have worked effectively with the local authority in introducing a new reading focus that has a greater emphasis on challenging texts. As a result, pupils' engagement and enthusiasm for reading has increased. Pupils I spoke to were very appreciative of the new texts and particularly enjoyed the work on 'Arthur Spiderwick's field guide', where they wrote their own field guides. Progress of disadvantaged pupils is similar to that of their peers and in several cases higher.
- You have recently changed how the school teaches mathematics as a result of the 2016 and 2017 published progress measures. Teachers have been encouraged to develop pupils' reasoning skills and ensure that gaps in knowledge and understanding are filled. This is accomplished via 'pre-teaching' pupils who may have misconceptions around a range of mathematical concepts. Current pupils are making strong progress in the majority of classes as a result of leaders' actions to stop the decline. However, in some classes, where the expectation of what pupils can achieve is lower, progress is not as good and the presentation of workbooks is untidy.
- My third line of enquiry centred on the school's work to help boys catch up with girls in reading and writing. Pupils join the school with boys already behind. Leaders have implemented a range of strategies such as: school trips that excite and enthuse boys; reading texts that stimulate boys' interests; and curriculum topics that have boys' learning as a key focus. As a result of these strategies, current boys are on track to leave the school with attainment that is closer to

that of the girls than in previous years. Boys' progress is strong where expectations of what they can achieve are high and girls' progress has not suffered as a result of leaders' actions to improve boys' attainment. Despite this effective start, you acknowledge that there is further work needed to ensure that the gender attainment gap closes completely.

- My final line of enquiry was to see how you and your leaders have planned the curriculum and the impact of its implementation. During the inspection, pupils were taught a range of subjects other than English and mathematics. Work in pupils' workbooks shows that they are taught a range of skills across the full curriculum and are encouraged to be scientists or artists rather than just being taught science and art. You and your leaders ensure that the curriculum evolves each year and plans show that topics change depending on the needs of the pupils. Governors, leaders and pupils spoke enthusiastically about the 'launch days' that the school holds to introduce the curriculum topics.
- As a result of careful planning, pupils receive a curriculum that is broad and balanced. However, you are aware that teachers do not routinely assess pupils' progress within subjects other than English and mathematics. Consequently, the impact of the curriculum is not fully monitored.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers throughout the school have consistently high expectations of what pupils can achieve and how they present their work
- boys make rapid progress in order for the attainment gap with girls to close further
- they develop an assessment tool that allows teachers to assess pupils' outcomes accurately across all subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Joseph Figg
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I spoke with you and your senior leadership team, six school governors and a representative from the local authority. I spoke to a group of pupils and individual pupils around the school. I made visits to lessons to observe pupils' learning and conducted several learning walks around the school. I also looked at

pupils' books across a range of ages and abilities as well as information from the school's assessment system. I scrutinised a range of documentary evidence, which included the school's self-evaluation, the school development plan and current progress information. I evaluated safeguarding referrals and child protection records, including the single central record. I also looked at the school's website. In addition, I took account of 62 responses to the Parent View online survey and 57 free-text comments.