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Mrs Claire Gunn
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Dear Mrs Gunn

Short inspection of St Mary's Infants' School

Following my visit to the school on 24 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 December 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.**

You and your leadership team have ensured that the school is a welcoming and happy place. There is a well-developed sense of community that effectively promotes relationships between adults and pupils. Strong social, moral and Christian values typified in 'sharing, caring, learning and living God' are at the heart of the school's ethos. Pupils are proud of their school and care for each other. One parent who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, described how, 'There is an ethos of acceptance of others, love of learning, strong values and fun.' Pupils are courteous and behave well. They speak confidently about their work and their school.

The previous inspection asked leaders to improve the teaching of phonics. As a result, leaders reviewed how groups are organised. This has ensured that teachers provide the support where it is required. We visited a phonics teaching session together. Pupils confidently use their phonic knowledge to identify different letter blends that make the same sound. Teaching assistants have received training internally to improve their skills. The leadership team regularly checks how well pupils are doing so that additional support can be provided to help them catch up. Since the last inspection, the proportion of pupils achieving the required score at the Year 1 phonics screening check has exceeded the national average. However, we found that pupils are not successfully using their phonics knowledge to spell accurately, as was evidenced in their workbooks. You have identified that this is an

area for improvement.

During the inspection, we looked at a sample of pupils' books across different classes. We agreed that these showed that progress in pupils' writing was inconsistent. Pupils' handwriting skills are weak. Some written work is limited or unfinished. Therefore, pupils' writing stamina and resilience are not developed. The standard of written work produced in topic books is not comparable to that produced in English workbooks. As a result, progress varies from different starting points.

Published assessment information shows that in 2017, at key stage 1, the proportion of pupils attaining expected standards and working at greater depth exceeded the national average in reading, writing and mathematics. However, the proportion of Reception children achieving a good level of development was below the national average, although improving over the past three years. This area of the school's work was a focus for this inspection. Inspection evidence gathered showed there is still more work to do to improve outcomes in the early years.

You, your leaders and governors, are clear about the areas you need to improve. The school improvement plan identifies actions to address these priorities. However, the plan does not include measurable targets or how frequently progress is checked towards achieving these aims. Consequently, the challenge provided by governors is not as rigorous as it should be.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils say they feel safe at school because they consider it is important to 'be kind to everyone'. The school's golden rules help pupils to understand how they should behave with one another. Pupils told me that adults listen to them and take their concerns seriously. Views from parents such as, 'The children are very happy and secure' reflected the overwhelming majority of sentiments expressed on Parent View.

You and your leaders have established a strong culture of safeguarding in the school. Three senior members of staff are trained as designated safeguarding leads so that you can discuss any concerns raised and take appropriate action. Records are well organised, accurately detailed and thorough. You ensure that staff are knowledgeable through regular safeguarding updates and training. Notices around the school remind adults about their safeguarding responsibilities and emphasise the importance of remaining vigilant. All of the required checks regarding the suitability of staff who work with children are carried out and clearly recorded.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry was about checking the progress of children in the early years provision. This was because in 2017 the proportion of children achieving the good level of development was below the national average. Boys' achievement was particularly low in the reading and writing early learning goals. No children exceeded the good level of development in mathematics.

- The school's own information shows that children enter the early years with development that is broadly typical for their age. Most children make progress. However, leaders do not analyse the information in a concise form to identify which groups of children need to make more progress in order to achieve as well as they can. The individual assessments of children's learning are too reliant on activities completed with adults. When children choose their own activities, teachers do not routinely take the opportunity to check on their learning. Consequently, assessment of children's learning is not as accurate as it should be.
- Leaders have ensured a well-organised learning environment in the Reception class base. Areas of learning are clearly defined and children use these productively. Children work well together and take turns during activities. You have rightly focused on developing children's language skills so that they are able to speak confidently and articulate words clearly. For example, one child provided me with an in-depth description of the butterfly plane constructed from play bricks.
- The outdoor learning environment provides opportunities for children to explore and investigate their ideas. For example, one group of boys constructed different lengths of ramps to test how quickly the ball rolled from one end to the other. Another group of boys used their imagination to build a base den from old car tyres. However, there are insufficient opportunities to develop early writing through play, particularly for boys.
- When we visited early years together, we observed children working on mathematical activities in groups. These activities were well planned and resources supported children's consolidation of number facts. Some work was challenging and your own assessment evidence suggests that the most able children are likely to exceed the mathematics early learning goal at the end of the year. When there was a change of activity, children were required to participate in additional directed tasks. Some found this too challenging and were unable to sustain their concentration, limiting the learning that took place during the session.
- My second line of enquiry focused on how leaders use the additional funding to improve the progress of disadvantaged pupils. This is because, at the last inspection, you were asked to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Improvements have been made since the previous inspection. You have a clear understanding of the barriers to learning that disadvantaged pupils face. For example, an additional adult provides tailored support to promote pupils' academic progress. Leaders make use of the school's tracking information to check that pupils are making progress from their starting points. Pupils' books show that progress is stronger in mathematics. In writing, progress reflects the inconsistent picture seen in books across the school.
- My third line of enquiry focused on what actions leaders take to ensure that pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities make good progress from their starting points. The provision for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is well led. Leaders are knowledgeable about different strategies that are used to support pupils in class. Regular meetings with teachers ensure that checks are made on the progress of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.

Where interventions are not effective, they are quickly changed and new plans developed. Those adults who provide additional support receive appropriate training. Their work is checked to ensure that agreed targets are achieved. Leaders are able to demonstrate how individual plans show the progress that each pupil makes. However, the information is not analysed as a whole group to ensure that governors have a good overview of the effective use of funding for this vulnerable group.

- Finally, I looked at attendance. This was because the most recent published data shows that attendance is below the national average. Persistent absence is above the national average. I looked at the actions leaders were taking to improve attendance rates.
- You and your governors have placed a high priority on improving attendance and have appointed an 'attendance champion'. The role of the champion is to raise the profile of frequent attendance and communicate with parents about the importance of regular attendance. You have ensured that the school's systems encourage regular attendance. The attendance champion, for example, works effectively with parents to support them in ensuring that their children come to school every day. Attendance is now improving. You have identified that there is still more work to do to address the attendance of particular groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders use information intelligently to identify emerging priorities and regularly check on the impact of actions taken to improve the progress of all pupils
- teachers plan opportunities for pupils to apply their basic English skills throughout the curriculum to develop their resilience and stamina so that all make the best progress from their starting points
- teachers plan for, observe and assess children's learning through play in the early years and ensure that there are more opportunities for children, particularly boys, to develop their literacy skills.

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

Steve Mellors
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held meetings with you; senior leaders; the inclusion coordinator; the leader of the early years; two governors, including the chair of the governing body; and the school's chosen improvement partner. I met with a group of pupils and spoke with other pupils during the day. I took note of 52 responses from Parent View and 39 free-text comments that were received. I considered the views of 11 staff who responded to the staff survey. I observed teaching and learning jointly with you. I looked at pupils' work in their classrooms and considered the progress evident in a selection of pupils' workbooks. I scrutinised school documents, including the child protection and safeguarding records, the school's improvement plan and self-evaluation document.