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Mrs Samantha Clarke
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Clarke

Short inspection of St Joseph's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Durham

Following my visit to the school on 10 July 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 vision and Catholic ethos, encapsulated in the motto 'Live Fully, Act Justly', remains very much in place. The staff continue to be a close-knit and a mutually supportive team who have the pupils' best interests at heart. Several important changes to the school have happened since the last inspection. The governors have formed a federation with a second local Catholic primary school and put in place an overarching model of leadership, with an executive headteacher across both schools. Following the retirement of the previous executive headteacher, you took up post last September and formed a new leadership team with the appointment of the deputy and assistant headteachers. Your first year as a new leadership team has been overseen and guided particularly well by the experienced and astute governors. Together, you have reviewed the school's performance, planned carefully and taken steps to ensure that areas of relative underperformance have been addressed. Morale in school is good. Middle leaders have benefited from working closely with local authority representatives and changes made, for example to the way reading skills are taught, have improved the quality and depth of pupils' learning.

Following the last inspection, leaders were asked to improve the quality of teaching and to use first-hand learning experiences as opportunities to develop pupils' English and mathematics skills. Since then, you have trained the staff in the characteristics of outstanding teaching and have enhanced the mathematics curriculum with better opportunities for reasoning and problem-solving. This year,

pupils have been inspired by visits from an author and a scientist. Other practical topics, such as building volcanoes and constructing a cross-section model of the Titanic have engaged pupils deeply and helped them to write creatively. Displays around the school are testament to the engaging and enjoyable activities that have captured pupils' imagination.

As standards attained in reading dipped somewhat last year, you have focused on this aspect of teaching. Good support has been provided by the local authority. Some teaching strategies used in key stage 2 in the past have been abandoned so that teachers can focus more explicitly on developing pupils' skills of comprehension and inference. The effect of these new approaches is strikingly evident in some pupils' books, where the depth of their study of texts such as 'Skellig', by David Almond, shows real maturity. However, pupils' skills in reading are variable across different key stage 2 classes and the best practice in teaching that has developed this year is yet to be captured and embedded fully. In the Reception Class and in key stage 1, basic skills in reading are taught effectively. Children learn to recognise the sounds letters and groups of letters make. Most pupils can use these skills to break down and decode new words effectively. In recent years, the proportion of pupils attaining the expected standard in the Year 1 national phonics screening check has been close to the national average. Most pupils who fall short of the standard in Year 1 attain it by Year 2. However, a small number of pupils need more help to develop as fluent readers, as they struggle to recognise words quickly and lose the meaning of sentences as they read, which detracts from their enjoyment of books. Although you are confident that the overall quality of teaching has improved, you have experienced some staff absence this year and you recognise this has hindered the progress of some pupils.

The provisional results of the 2018 key stage 2 national curriculum tests have confirmed your confidence in the quality of teaching. The results show that the proportions of pupils attaining the expected standard in reading and writing are in line with those seen nationally and, in mathematics, are above average. Most pleasingly, the proportion of pupils attaining the higher standard in reading and mathematics and attaining greater depth in writing is well above average. Teachers' assessments also show pupils learn effectively at key stage 1, with standards of attainment in reading, writing and mathematics being sustained above those seen nationally. As children also quickly acquire basic skills in the Reception Year, this is a positive picture, particularly because around a third of pupils are disadvantaged and the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is well above average.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. A comprehensive review of safeguarding procedures was undertaken this spring. Policies have been updated and all members of staff have received the necessary training. There are helpful displays of safeguarding information around the school and good systems are in place for when senior leaders are working elsewhere in the federation. Thorough checks are made on all adults who work in or

visit the school. Leaders have put in place better systems for reporting and recording any concerns that arise. Prompt action is taken when it is needed. Leaders work effectively with other agencies and pursue a prompt resolution to concerns.

Pupils told me they feel safe in school. They describe the staff as caring and trust them to help if they feel worried. Parents and carers also have confidence the school is a safe and secure place.

Inspection findings

- As there have been considerable changes in leadership and management since the last inspection, I looked closely at the effect these changes are having on the school's performance. I found the new leadership team has made a promising start. Both you and your deputy headteacher know the school well and divide your time thoughtfully across the federation. At St Joseph's, the staff feel well supported and guided and most parents I spoke to, or who responded via Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, are pleased with the quality of education provided. In many ways, the transition to the new leadership team has been seamless. Both senior and middle leaders are being ably supported to develop their leadership skills by colleagues in the local authority. In addition, the highly experienced chair of the governing body is providing excellent ongoing support.
- There is a rigour about most leadership and management systems. Your improvement plans are comprehensive and have successfully focused on the most pressing priorities. You use assessment information well to track pupils' progress and to ensure that you deploy staff resources where they are most needed. However, your approach to checking the quality of teaching and learning is less well developed. The frequency of leaders' checks has fallen away across the year and not all records have been collated and reviewed well enough. Too many checks focus on whether teachers comply with policies and do not capture specifically the effect teaching has on deepening pupils' learning. Consequently, the feedback given to teachers is not pertinent enough to help them improve their practice.
- During this inspection I also looked closely at the teaching of reading, as pupils' attainment in reading dipped last year. I found swift action has been taken. The subject leaders for English have made changes that have helped to deepen pupils' skills. The range of books in school has been audited and new books have been bought. Class sets of age-appropriate books have been placed in each classroom and novels are studied in more depth. Teachers are more precise in setting learning objectives and criteria for pupils to evaluate their work. In some key stage 2 classes, pupils deepen their understanding of books effectively by exploring background themes, analysing characters and exploring the author's use of language. There are some good examples of pupils selecting quotations and other evidence from the text to substantiate their arguments. However, improvements are more obvious in some teachers' practice than others and further work is needed to ensure the best practice becomes more widely established.

- I also wanted to see how well pupils who speak English as an additional language achieve. This is because around a quarter of pupils in the school fall into this group. The number of pupils who join or leave the school during key stages is also high. However, the school is highly inclusive and keen to meet the needs of all pupils. You have good arrangements in place to meet with families and assess pupils' starting points. Teaching assistants are skilled in adapting and tailoring the work set and provide good, ongoing help during lessons and to small groups of pupils who are new to speaking English. In most lessons extra resources are provided to help pupils learn the meaning of new words. The additional support the school provides ensures that most pupils quickly acquire a good grasp of English and are therefore able to thrive and make good progress.
- The governors provide excellent strategic oversight of the school. They have successfully established a federation of two schools and built an appropriate and effective model of leadership. They are ambitious and balance their support and challenge effectively. They have well-developed systems in place to monitor and evaluate the school's performance and hold leaders to account. Governors have carefully assessed the development needs of the leadership team and provided extra help in areas such as financial management.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- a programme of purposeful checks on the quality of teaching is sustained and used to provide teachers with helpful feedback
- the best practice in the teaching of reading is shared and becomes established more widely across the school
- all pupils who need extra help to become fluent readers get the support they need in key stage 1.

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

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection, I met with you, the deputy headteacher and a group of governors, including the chair of the governing body. I also met with a group of pupils and listened to some of them read. Together, you or the deputy headteacher

and I visited lessons in each phase of the school to look at the quality of teaching and learning. During lesson visits, I scrutinised some pupils' books and talked to pupils about their learning and progress. The subject leaders for English and I looked in detail at some pupils' English books and I met with the assistant headteacher to evaluate the progress pupils are making across a broad range of subjects. I looked at the 22 responses to Parent View, and I also considered the nine responses to Ofsted's staff survey. I scrutinised a range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning, policies, assessment information and monitoring records. I also checked other documents available on the school website. I focused particularly on the progress of pupils in key stage 2, especially in reading, the breadth of the curriculum and the quality of leadership and management. I also looked at the work of governors and the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.