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Mrs Rebecca McKinney
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs McKinney

Short inspection of St Alban's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 13 September 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 November 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Currently, the school is improving rapidly.

As headteacher, you have made sound decisions and prioritised wisely. You have a well-informed and realistic view of the school, and use this as the basis for your plans. During the inspection, leaders demonstrated that they could evaluate the quality of teaching astutely. Governors are effective in both supporting the school and holding leaders to account for their impact on pupils' learning. Leaders and governors have given careful thought to how the school addresses its budget deficit without compromising on the quality of its provision. Leaders make excellent use of the Tolkien collaborative, comprising nine local schools, to draw on best practice and to check on standards.

When you took up your post two years ago pupils' attainment was generally in line with the national average at key stage 1 and key stage 2. However, pupils were not achieving well in writing. Few were attaining at greater depth, and in 2016 Year 6 pupils had made weak progress in writing from their key stage 1 starting points. You focused on the teaching of English and mathematics, demonstrating good practice and setting higher expectations. You made sure that teachers understood how well their pupils were learning, and knew how to support any at risk of falling behind. As a result, standards have risen sharply. Pupils across the school are now making consistently strong progress in the core subjects.

You have placed an equal value on developing the school's ethos. Its Christian character permeates every aspect, and the school's values underpin a mutually supportive school community. Some who spoke to me naturally described the school as a family. Leaders have paid due regard to teachers' workload and well-being, and staff are enthusiastic to play their part in leading the school forward. When vacancies have arisen, leaders have been able to make successful appointments. You have ensured that the school building is safe, attractive and enhanced by relevant displays.

Pupils treat adults and their peers with conspicuous respect, raise money for charity and visit a residential home to sing for the residents. Their attitudes to learning are overwhelmingly positive, and they take great pride in their work. At social times, they play happily together, benefiting from a good range of playground equipment. Attendance is above the national average. Pupils explained to me how the school council and the opportunity to take up representative roles allow them to contribute to the improvement of the school. They are knowledgeable about faiths and cultures other than their own.

Leaders have taken successful action to address the areas for improvement identified at the time of the last inspection. Children in the Reception Year have access to a small but serviceable outdoor area adjacent to the classroom, with the additional opportunity to use a 'forest school' space across the playground. The learning I observed during the inspection was well paced, varied and engaging, consistently securing and sustaining pupils' interest. Work is appropriately challenging, and older pupils and the most able have opportunities to extend their knowledge and understanding at the partner secondary school.

Safeguarding is effective.

The culture of safeguarding in the school is strong. All arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff know their pupils and the community very well. Leaders have made sure that staff are thoroughly trained to identify any problems that pupils may face, and are alert to signs that they may not be safe. The school's records show that on the relatively rare occasions when a risk to pupils arises, leaders work effectively with parents and other agencies that work to protect children. Leaders have taken important steps to ensure that the site is secure.

Pupils told me that they feel entirely safe in school. They said that bullying occurs very rarely, if it happens at all. They placed great confidence in the anti-bullying ambassadors and staff to resolve any problems. Pupils were able to recall in good detail the advice that they have received on how to stay safe online. They also know about the risks posed by fire, water hazards and the roads.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have a very good understanding of how to teach writing. You and your fellow leaders have raised teachers' expectations of what pupils can and should achieve. You have recognised that good books inspire children to write well, and

the importance of developing pupils' speaking skills. Leaders have also implemented a programme to enhance older pupils' spelling. Pupils make good use of feedback from teachers and their peers to improve their own work. Those workbooks, available from last academic year, showed that teachers have implemented these approaches consistently well.

- You appreciate that real contexts for writing, often arising in other subject areas, provide particularly valuable opportunities. Religious education has proved a particularly fruitful subject. Inspection evidence showed that teachers know the importance of explicit attention to pupils' spoken and written vocabulary. They encourage pupils to consider their choice of words, whether they are thinking creatively or using the subject-specific vocabulary of mathematics or science.
- During the 2017/18 academic year, you addressed some weaknesses in the school's curriculum. In particular, you had identified that pupils were not learning as much science as they should. Leaders have raised the profile of science, for example by trips to places such as the National Space Centre and celebrating the achievement of female scientists. Pupils use the laboratories of the secondary school in your local collaborative to enhance their practical skills. You have also purchased new tablet computers, and introduced a new programme of study for information technology.
- The pupils who spoke with me greatly enjoy their learning, in part because of the varied curriculum they now experience. The 'wow days' which start each topic succeed in grabbing their attention. Nevertheless, there is work still to do to ensure that pupils learn consistently well in foundation subjects. Some arrangements, such as those for the teaching of information technology and modern foreign languages, are new. Some subject leads are not experienced in checking on the quality of teaching. Some of the subject improvement plans that I scrutinised did not provide a secure basis for developing and evaluating the quality of provision.
- The previous inspection report required leaders to ensure that they addressed fully any parental concerns. Current leaders maintain an effective regular communication with parents. They send home regular newsletters and stand at the school gate. Leaders have recently introduced a planner, which allows parents to comment on how they have supported their children's learning. The school conducts its own surveys of parental opinion, which are posted on the website. It holds workshops to explain the school's practice to parents and celebrate pupils' achievements. You said that parents appreciate that pupils now have access to a wide range of after-school clubs.
- Leaders' work to secure parents' support has been almost entirely successful. During the inspection, parents who spoke to me in person and those who responded to Parent View expressed themselves as being overwhelmingly satisfied with the school. Some commented on the exceptional level of personal care that their children had received. Nevertheless, a few parents remain to be convinced on the single issue of how well the school deals with bullying.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching in all foundation subjects is at least good, and enables pupils to make strong gains in the knowledge and understanding of those subjects
- leaders provide the necessary guidance to their colleagues and effective checks on the quality of the teaching in foundation subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Martin Spoor
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

Thank you for contributing to the inspection during your maternity leave. During the inspection, I met with you and the acting headteacher, other leaders and governors. I also held informal conversations with other members of staff. I spoke by telephone with a representative of the diocese. I observed the teaching of English, mathematics and a few other subjects jointly with senior leaders. I scrutinised some of the writing in pupils' workbooks from last academic year. I met with a group of pupils to gather their views, and spoke informally with many more. I spoke with parents at the start of the school day. I observed pupils' behaviour at social times and when they moved around the school.

I took account of the 57 recent responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire. I also considered 16 responses to the survey for staff, and 27 responses to the pupil questionnaire.

I scrutinised a wide range of documents both electronically and on paper, including the school's evaluation of its own performance and its plans for improvement; records of governors' meetings; an external review of the school; policies; curriculum plans; and records of pupils' achievement, attendance and behaviour. I looked in detail at records which show how the school keeps pupils safe.