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Mrs Stephanie Hewitt
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hewitt

Short inspection of St Thomas More Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 4 October 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 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. This is testament to the passion, commitment and energy of leaders at all levels. Governors set a clear strategic aim for the school to provide the very best for each pupil. You drive that vision forward with a deep belief in doing whatever is right for your pupils. Your senior team shares your sense of purpose. Staff work hard to turn leaders' ambition into reality. All place the pupils' needs at the heart of what they do. As a result, they are prepared to go the extra mile to implement leaders' plans, because they know it is in the pupils' interest.

Leaders constantly seek to find better ways of doing things that will benefit pupils. They are quick to act if they see room for improvement. A belief that 'we must not stand still' permeates the school's work. Leaders' outward-looking approach has brought many benefits to the school. For example, governors are proactive in finding ways to develop their individual and corporate skills. Senior leaders work with other local schools to review the quality of each other's work. This brings an objective view and a chance to share the best from other schools. Teachers learn from a wide range of work with other schools and networks.

Following the previous inspection, leaders invested much time and resources into improving the teaching of mathematics. As a result, outcomes in mathematics have improved. Pupils now confidently use knowledge about numbers to solve problems. Increasingly, they are learning to deepen their understanding by reasoning mathematically.

Similarly, leaders have focused heavily on improving pupils' basic skills in writing. For example, they have introduced a clear expectation for the style of pupils' handwriting. Pupils now learn this from an early age. As a result, pupils are developing a neat, fluent style. Leaders have also invested in training and resources to enable teachers and teaching assistants to teach phonics more effectively. Consequently, pupils now learn their letter sounds quickly and use them confidently to spell new words. Leaders have redoubled their efforts to improve older pupils' spelling. Teachers insist that pupils spell words correctly whenever they are writing, regardless of the subject they are writing in.

Leaders keep a close eye on teaching. They have an accurate view of its quality. This is because they judge it according to the impact it has on outcomes for pupils. Leaders give helpful pointers to teachers that help to sharpen up their practice. Teachers feel well supported by this process and willingly make the necessary changes. This is why the quality of teaching remains strong.

Leaders also check pupils' progress closely and make teachers aware of any pupils who are not doing as well as they should. Leaders have spotted that this has been the case for a group of previously middle-attaining pupils in Years 3 to 6. Some of these pupils have not maintained the standards they should in reading and writing. They are not currently reaching their potential, which is the school's stated aim. Leaders are focusing their attention closely on these pupils. They are holding teachers and teaching assistants to account for helping these pupils to catch up quickly. As a result, these pupils are making better progress and are getting back on track.

In addition to this group of pupils, some lower-attainers are not making as much progress in writing as they could. This is true in both key stage 1 and key stage 2. This is because teachers lack confidence in knowing how best to support these pupils. Leaders have not focused as closely on this smaller group as they have on the middle-attainers. Consequently, these pupils are not catching up as quickly.

Leaders have thoroughly unpicked and analysed the reasons why the results of last year's national assessments for Year 6 appear lower than they should have been. They are honest about the factors that caused the slow progress for some pupils and have been proactive in dealing with them. The figures are not a true reflection of the actual quality of education the pupils received between Year 2 and Year 6. Most did as well as they should have, given their capabilities.

Nevertheless, leaders are not complacent. Leaders began to take action to improve pupils' outcomes in reading and writing before the results were known. This is because leaders could see that some pupils' progress in these subjects could be better. Leaders' actions are already making a difference. For example, pupils say they are more motivated to read in school and at home than before. This is the result of the school's efforts to promote a love of reading. Leaders' plans to improve the quality of pupils' writing are at an earlier stage of implementation. Therefore, it is too soon to determine the impact.

Governors know the school well. They are closely involved in the life of the school, which keeps them informed about what is working well and what is not. Nevertheless, governors maintain an effective strategic view of the overall quality of provision. They do this by asking challenging questions and seeking whatever information they need. Governors evaluate the impact of the school's work based on what difference it is making to pupils. If something is not making a sufficient difference, it is changed. In this way, governance continues to drive improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

Safeguarding is effective because the culture of the school places pupils' well-being at its heart. Staff are very well attuned to pupils' welfare. They act quickly and appropriately to help when they suspect all may not be well. Parents praise the school for the high degree of care their children receive. They know staff will do all they can to protect their children.

Leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Policies set out what is expected and how staff should act in given circumstances. Procedures for reporting and recording concerns are clear and easily followed. Systems for pursuing concerns and working with outside organisations are used effectively. As a result, pupils who need help and their families are well supported.

Inspection findings

- The early years provision continues to be a strength of the school. When children join in the Nursery or Reception classes, about half have skills that are typical for three- or four-year-olds. By the time they start Year 1, most have achieved the level of development expected for five-year-olds. Almost all children reach or exceed the necessary goals in reading, writing and mathematics to be ready to start Year 1. This shows they make considerable progress in the early years.
- The quality of phonics teaching has improved notably in the early years and key stage 1. In the past, some pupils struggled to learn their letter sounds well enough. This led to difficulties in reading and writing confidently for pupils in Year 3 and beyond. The issue has been eliminated. Last year, all Year 1 pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check.
- Leaders are successfully addressing the relative underperformance of some previously middle-attaining pupils. They have spotted that their progress stalled at some point in key stage 2. Leaders and teachers are working hard to help them make up the lost ground and go on to reach their potential.
- Lower-attaining pupils are well supported in lessons. As a result, they make good progress in many subjects. However, their progress in writing is not as good as it could be. They are confident to write and have a go happily. Teachers sometimes struggle to know how best to help these pupils improve their writing. Teachers, rightly, do not want to overwhelm these pupils with guidance. As a result, they sometimes do not give enough challenge. Consequently, these pupils do not reach the standards they might.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers have the knowledge they need to help lower-attaining pupils make good progress in writing.

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 Staffordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sandra Hayes
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, other school staff and governors. I held telephone conversations with the school improvement adviser from the Archdiocese of Birmingham and a representative of the local authority. I visited classrooms to observe pupils and to talk with them about their learning. I met with a group of pupils, looked at the work in their books and scrutinised the work in a selection of other pupils' books in each class. I spoke with parents at the end of the school day. I also considered the responses to the school's parent survey and the 30 responses to Ofsted's Parent View survey. I spoke informally to staff around the school and took into account the nine staff survey responses. I examined a range of documents including: leaders' checks on the quality of education; their plans for improvement; minutes of governors' meetings; and documents related to safeguarding.