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Mrs Carmel Dodds
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Dear Mrs Dodds

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 16 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 predecessor school was judged to be good in November 2013.

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.**

When you took up your post as interim headteacher in September 2017, and subsequently became substantive headteacher in March 2018, you rightly identified that the rates of progress pupils have been making in English and mathematics by the end of Year 6 have declined over recent years. Outcomes for pupils in these subjects by the end of key stage 1, and in the Year 1 phonics check, have not been consistently good. You have been resolute in your approach to improving outcomes for pupils. You have established a culture at the school where the needs of the pupils come first. You have restructured the senior leadership team. Together with your assistant headteachers, you have involved all staff in the improvements you have been making. You have ensured that they understand the need to improve the quality of provision and how this will be achieved. This enables them to be as determined as you are to ensure that the new strategies are consistently applied and make a difference to outcomes for pupils. Unconfirmed data in 2018 shows that there are some signs of improvement. For example, the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard at the end of Year 6 in reading, writing and mathematics combined improved considerably in 2018. The strategies you and your staff have been implementing are starting to have an effect. Staff at all levels also appreciate that, during this time of rapid change, you have been mindful of their workload and work-life balance.

In April 2016, the school became an academy as part of the St Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Academies Trust. The trust has provided useful support to you in improving the quality of teaching over recent months. A new chief executive officer (CEO) took up his post in April 2018. He has strengthened the trust's approach to holding leaders to account. The members of local school committee have benefited from training. They are able to undertake their responsibilities, particularly in relation to checking the work of the school more effectively. The CEO, trustees and local school committee demonstrate a determination to provide the necessary support and challenge for you to continue to successfully implement the improvements you have been making.

Over recent months, there have been some changes to the middle leadership of subjects and other responsibilities, such as those of the special educational needs coordinator. You have written a handbook to support middle leaders in undertaking their roles. You provide time for them to undertake their responsibilities on a rota basis. They have not had any formal training, and the development of their skills and roles is still in its early stages. They have not yet evaluated the curriculum or had time to improve the quality of teaching and outcomes in their area of responsibility.

During our tour of the school to see the learning that was taking place, we saw that pupils are attentive in lessons. Teachers develop pupils' understanding and use of vocabulary well. For example, a pupil in a key stage 1 class explained to me that he had used a dictionary to check how to spell a word he wanted to write, but that he sometimes used it to look up unfamiliar words to find out what they mean. In other classes, teachers ensured that pupils understood and could use the word 'vulnerable', and they discussed the effectiveness of phrases such as, 'thunder growls furiously' in poetry. Teachers and teaching assistants ask carefully considered questions to tease out pupils' understanding of the ideas that are being taught and to check how well pupils are grasping the concepts when they are working on the tasks that are set for them.

St Mary's is an inclusive school. Pupils learn about a wide range of religions and cultures. They told me, 'It doesn't matter what you look like, what matters is what is in your heart.' They are being well prepared for life in modern Britain. Pupils told me that they enjoy being at school. They can undertake roles of responsibility, such as being a librarian or a prayer leader, or by representing their peers on the school council. The school council helps to organise charity fund-raising events for pupils to participate in.

Pupils told me that they enjoy their lessons, but they would like the opportunity to study a wider range of subjects, such as art and design technology, more regularly. You have already noticed that computing has not been taught well. You have purchased up-to-date equipment and provided curriculum guidance for teachers to be able to teach computing more effectively. However, you have not evaluated the curriculum fully to check that it meets the needs of the pupils or that it is effective in improving outcomes for pupils.

In lessons and around school, pupils behave well. They demonstrate their good manners when they speak with adults and their peers. Pupils, including those in the Sunshine Room, which provides for pupils in key stage 1 who have social, emotional and behavioural needs from the school and other schools, were keen to show me their work.

The majority of parents and carers who spoke to me, or who expressed a view through the online survey, Parent View, spoke highly of the school. Typically, they told me that the school has a community feel and is family orientated. They appreciate that staff are approachable and make themselves available to talk about their children. As one parent explained, 'We work together. It's about partnership.'

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You and your administrative staff ensure that the appropriate vetting checks take place when an adult starts working or volunteering at the school. The single central record of vetting checks is well kept. You keep records relating to child protection securely and in detail. You make sure that staff receive up-to-date training, so that they know the signs of potential abuse to look out for. They are clear about the school's procedures for raising a concern about a child's welfare.

Supported by your family support worker, you engage well with external agencies to support pupils and families. This includes the local police community support officer, who visits the school to speak with pupils about issues such as 'county lines' exploitation. Pupils learn about road safety and they appreciate the information they receive before the school holidays to remind them about safety when they are not in school, such as when they are swimming or using the internet.

Most pupils speak knowledgeably about how to keep themselves safe when they use the internet, particularly those in Years 5 and 6. A display in the school library, placed near the computers, reminds pupils about this important safety matter. Some younger pupils were less sure about what they should do to keep themselves safe when they use modern technology.

Pupils say that bullying is rare, but they are confident that a trusted adult would help them if it ever did happen.

Inspection findings

- As you evaluated the variability in pupils' outcomes, you identified that the school's assessment system was not being used well enough to identify the gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. You and your assistant headteachers have responded decisively. You have introduced more precise assessment systems and provided staff with training, so that they are able to identify and address gaps in pupils' knowledge much more quickly. Pupils' books show that this is proving successful. Teachers typically plan learning that builds progressively on what pupils know and can do.

- You had also noticed that teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve have been too low. You have introduced a new approach to handwriting and a format for the front cover of pupils' books to encourage pupils' pride in their work. Most pupils present their work well. As I looked at books with leaders, we saw that some inconsistency remains in teachers' expectations of how well pupils present their work. Some teachers do not reliably insist that pupils use their basic skills, such as capital letters, when they write.
- The leader for mathematics enlisted the support of an external consultant, who has provided every teacher with bespoke training over the course of a year to help them improve their practice. Teachers have responded very well to this. Work in pupils' books, and the school's own assessment information, show that pupils currently in school are making much stronger progress than has previously been seen in mathematics. This has proven so successful that you plan to take the same approach to improving the teaching of English in future.
- The middle leader with responsibility for phonics made changes to the organisation of phonics lessons last year. Pupils were taught in smaller groups according to their ability, for example. The changes did not have the impact she had hoped for and the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics check in 2018 was below the national average, particularly so for boys. She has made further improvements at the start of this year. She is checking more frequently how well pupils are progressing with their phonics and making adjustments to ensure that stronger progress is made. There are early signs of success, but it is too soon to judge whether this will be successful.
- Over recent years, pupils' rates of attendance have steadily declined to be below the national average. You and your family support worker keep a check on pupils' attendance and speak with parents whose children's attendance is of concern. An eye-catching display in the school's entrance corridor celebrates the attendance of each class. You reward individual pupils for good rates of attendance. These strategies have had some success, with rates of attendance improving at the start of this academic year.
- You allocate the majority of the pupil premium funding to provide additional learning support for disadvantaged pupils who will benefit from it. You also use the funding to provide financial support, so that pupils can take part in school trips and clubs, for example. You keep a check on the progress that disadvantaged pupils make in English and mathematics. You are unable to evaluate how successful the funding is in overcoming pupils' barriers to learning, because you have not identified the specific barriers that pupils have to overcome.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they develop the skills of middle leaders, so they can improve the quality of teaching and standards in their areas of responsibility
- teachers raise their expectations of what pupils can achieve, making certain that

pupils work to the best of their ability

- they evaluate the impact of the implementation of the curriculum, making the necessary adaptations to ensure that it meets the needs of the pupils who attend the school
- the additional funding for disadvantaged pupils is rigorously evaluated to ensure that it is effectively used to overcome pupils' barriers to learning
- they work more extensively to improve pupils' rates of attendance further
- pupils are fully aware, in a way that is appropriate for their age, of how to keep themselves safe when they use the internet.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Northampton, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northamptonshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Di Mullan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the assistant headteachers, a selection of staff, the CEO of the trust, the chair of the school committee and one of the trustees. Together with the headteacher, I observed learning in Reception and in both key stages 1 and 2. Together with leaders, I examined a range of pupils' books from across the school.

I spoke with a member of staff from a partner school that a pupil attends on a part-time basis. I spoke with parents as they brought their children to school and considered their views through the 27 responses and 14 free-text comments to the online survey, Parent View. I considered the 14 responses to the staff online survey. There were no responses to the pupil survey, but I spoke with pupils in every class we visited and formally with a group of six pupils.

I examined a range of school documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, the development plan and minutes of school committee meetings. I scrutinised a range of documentation relating to the safeguarding of pupils, including the single central record of vetting checks.