

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234  
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Mr Michael Craig  
Headteacher  
St James' CofE Infant and Nursery School  
High Street  
Whitehaven  
Cumbria  
CA28 7PZ

Dear Mr Craig

### **Short inspection of St James' CofE Infant and Nursery School**

Following my visit to the school on 12 December 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 March 2014.

#### **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 is a happy and welcoming environment. Pupils arrive promptly each morning. Their parents and carers accompany them to the classrooms, where they are warmly greeted by the class teachers. You have ensured that the school's Christian values are at the centre of the school's work. The school is a vibrant and stimulating learning environment. The staff take time to promote high-quality writing, art and design in the many colourful displays that celebrate pupils' achievements across the school.

You were appointed as headteacher in September 2017. Prior to your appointment the school had, for several years, experienced a pronounced downturn in the attainment of pupils. With the support of your leaders and staff, you have ensured that the fortunes of the school have improved. Together, you have created a detailed school development plan and a long-term strategic plan to ensure that the school provides a good standard of education. The evaluation of the school's effectiveness is accurate and firmly rooted in evidence. As a result, previous high levels of support from the local authority are no longer needed at this school.

The proportion of children leaving the Reception class with a good level of development rose sharply in 2018. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard in the phonics screening check has been higher than the national average for several years. Pupils' attainment by the end of Year 2 has risen in reading, writing and mathematics for three consecutive years. The school's own assessment information shows that pupils make strong progress in English and mathematics in Years 1 and 2.

Pupils said that they are happy at school. Their behaviour is good, and they have excellent manners. Pupils said that they enjoy school and that name-calling and bullying do not happen. Through the curriculum, pupils learn about differences. They talk about how everyone's family is unique and how it is OK to be different. Pupils enjoy finding out new things and they relish the wide range of extra-curricular experiences on offer. For example, they can take part in writing, gymnastics, football and cookery clubs. The older pupils enjoy taking on the role of St James' Shepherds, where they look after the younger pupils at playtimes.

Parents and carers hold the school in high regard. They said that you and the staff are always approachable. Parents told me that they had no concerns about the behaviour of the pupils in the school and they know that their children are safe. All of the parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, said that they would recommend the school. One view, typical of many stated, 'The bar has been raised beyond my expectations. St James' is a lovely school with a wonderful ethos and passion for learning.'

Governors have a detailed understanding of the many strengths of the school and the areas that need to be further improved. They have ensured that all safeguarding measures are in place. Governors have ensured that additional funding through the pupil premium funding is carefully spent to support disadvantaged pupils. Governors support and challenge you well. For example, when a new system for the teaching of phonics was introduced, governors challenged you to justify your reasons for making a cultural shift in relation to how phonics had been previously taught. They are pleased that your actions have proved to be successful.

At the previous inspection, the inspectors asked leaders to ensure that pupils are challenged and to provide staff with more opportunities to share best practice. Work seen in pupils' books, both in key stage 1 and in the early years, shows that pupils make good progress in English and mathematics. In mathematics, teachers challenge pupils well and provide them with many opportunities to master their basic skills. Pupils said that they enjoy their mathematics lessons, where teachers use interesting techniques such as 'chips and peas' as opposed to the traditional 'tens and units'. Pupils benefit from regular challenge tasks and opportunities to develop their learning further. The teaching of writing focuses on challenging pupils through supported and unsupported work. This is not fully effective and too often, in writing, all pupils complete the same work and pupils are not challenged as well as they are in mathematics.

You now ensure that teachers and teaching assistants regularly share best practice. This has been most successful in the implementation of the new system for the teaching of phonics. Pupils' phonics work is of a high standard. Effective teacher questioning and carefully planned tasks ensure that this area continues to be a strength of the school. You regularly carry out observations of teaching and learning. You look at samples of pupils' work and you talk to pupils about their learning. You use this gathered information to discuss the outcomes of your findings with the staff and align it with your school development priorities. Teachers and subject leaders also benefit from working with other schools in your cluster.

Together, you review examples of pupils' work and check the accuracy and quality of your assessments.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You have ensured that all checks have been made on the suitability of adults to work in the school. As the designated lead for safeguarding, you have made strong links with children's social care, the police and a local counselling service. Your work with partner agencies is effective in ensuring that pupils and their families receive timely and effective support.

All members of staff have a thorough understanding of their responsibilities to safeguard pupils in their care. Staff are vigilant and are aware of signs of potential abuse or radicalisation. Parents said that their children are safe in school. Pupils said that they feel safe in school.

### **Inspection findings**

- During this inspection, I focused on three lines of enquiry. The first of these related to writing in the early years. Between 2015 and 2017, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the end of the Reception year was lower than the national average. In 2018, 86% of children achieved a good level of development. This leap in children's attainment has come about through a range of effective strategies that you have implemented. For example, in 2017, you reorganised the provision for the Reception children. Opportunities to develop writing skills are now well embedded in every area of learning. A focused approach to the teaching of writing in the early years provision now enables children to write across a range of activities. Work seen in children's books shows that they make strong progress in writing. Children said that they enjoy putting on their writing utility belts as they take their work with them and engage in learning. Interesting topics such as 'superheroes' and 'people that help us' enable the children to use their imagination and develop their inquisitiveness.
- To develop writing, reading and mathematics even more in the early years and build on the successes of 2018, you have opened a Nursery this year. You recognised that a significant number of children were arriving at your school from a wide range of pre-schools. The experiences of these children were vastly different. This has been resolved as the children in the Nursery and Reception classes now learn together for part of each day. Your plans indicate that you want to give these children a better start in Nursery so that when they move into the Reception year, they will have better skills in English and mathematics. These plans, along with the increase in the proportion of children achieving a good level of development, have strengthened the early years provision across the school. However, it is too early to judge the impact of your actions yet on sustaining and securing better outcomes for children in the early years over time.
- The next area that I focused on was attendance. Rates of absence have been higher than the national average for several years. School attendance from September to December 2018 is better than the same period last year. You work

hard to promote better attendance. Good attendance is celebrated in assemblies and pupils enjoy earning rewards. You have created effective links with the local authority's inclusion and access officer to target hard-to-reach and vulnerable families. Although attendance is improving, too many families continue to take pupils out of school for extended periods of leave during term time.

- The final area that I focused on during the inspection related to the school's curriculum. The curriculum on offer is exciting and prepares pupils well for the next stages of their education and for life in modern Britain. Pupils learn to stay safe. They know not to talk to strangers. The school environment is designed around high-quality work. Vibrant and colourful displays ignite curious minds. Pupils listen to music regularly. They focus on a different composer each month to develop an eclectic appreciation of music. For example, the genres they learn about range from the movie scores of John Williams to the rock songs of Queen and Freddie Mercury. Older pupils learn about entrepreneurial skills. Last year, they started a business with £50. Pupils designed a range of bags through their business model and raised over £550 for a local charity. Recently, the school has forged links with a school in France. Although this work is still in its infancy, it is already broadening pupils' experiences of other cultures. Exciting curriculum topics allow the pupils to study and learn about faiths and cultures in depth. For example, the pupils completed a topic about Brazil. Within this topic, they explored music and traditional dance. Pupils compared land use in Brazil to England and focused on the impact of farming. All of this work culminated in a school carnival. Work in pupils' books is of a high standard. They take pride in their learning. The oldest pupils have developed a good understanding of democracy and British values. Pupils compared voting in parliament to voting for a favourite class story.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue with their efforts to improve school attendance
- more opportunities are provided for the most able writers to develop their writing across the curriculum
- the changes to the early years are embedded and sustain the current improvement in the proportion of children achieving a good level of development.

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

Yours sincerely

John Donald  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Information about the inspection**

With you, I carried out visits to each class. I scrutinised a wide range of school documentation, including the school development plan, the strategic improvement plan and the school's self-evaluation. I examined a range of school assessment information. I scrutinised the school's single record and information about staff recruitment. I met with three members of the governing body, including the chair of governors. I held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. Together, we looked at examples of pupils' work in the classes we visited.

I took into consideration the 46 responses to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, the 12 responses to the staff survey and the 23 responses to the pupils' survey. I also considered the 11 responses to the free-text facility. I spoke to parents before the inspection and to pupils through the day.