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11 January 2019

Mr David Miller
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Miller

Short inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Blackhill

Following my visit to the school on 18 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 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your arrival in January 2016, you have worked with your team to strengthen the curriculum and improve the quality of teaching. Pupils, parents and carers value the culture of care and support that you and your team have established. You have created a learning environment where pupils make very good academic progress and develop confidence and a sense responsibility towards themselves and others.

Your arrival at the school took place at a time of change, with the introduction of a new national curriculum. Your team has responded extremely well to the demands of that curriculum and new forms of assessment. You have worked with your team to raise expectations and the level of challenge, contributing to improvements in pupils' outcomes at the end of key stage 2. Between 2016 and 2018, pupils have made outstanding progress in reading, achieving levels of attainment that would place them in the top 10% of schools nationally. Despite a slight dip in 2018, pupils have typically made good progress in mathematics, with attainment once again in the top 10% of schools nationally. Your team has also worked to secure improvements in pupils' writing, which has risen continuously over the past three years. These outcomes have been achieved through consistently effective teaching across many year groups.

You also worked to develop the effectiveness of leadership at many levels. The

appointment of a new deputy headteacher, in September 2018, has given additional capacity at senior level. You have given subject leaders in English and mathematics responsibility for leading improvement strategies. Your special educational needs coordinator has a thorough understanding of pupils' needs and is developing close links with parents to support effective provision. In the early years, your leader is exploring how greater challenge can enhance children's learning and play. You also ensure that the quality of teaching is thoroughly checked. You combine joint observations of learning with middle leaders, alongside scrutiny of pupils' work and progress. You and your governors have introduced stronger systems of accountability. Along with subject leaders, you share improvement plans and reviews of performance directly with governors at meetings of the governing body. Your team openly invites additional scrutiny from the local authority in areas including safeguarding, governance and special educational needs. As a result, you gain objective insight into the effect of your work.

You have introduced effective systems to check pupils' progress and their access to the wider curriculum. You check pupils' progress at regular intervals. You use this information to help teachers to modify their planning and arrange support to address any emerging underachievement. Your team has a good understanding of standards. Local authority reviews have found your assessment processes to be accurate. You have also introduced processes to ensure that pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. The thoroughness and regularity of these checks are contributing to the improvements you are continuing to secure.

Pupils enjoy their learning. They are appreciative of the support they receive and the wider opportunities your team provides. Pupils show a strong understanding of their rights and responsibilities and this is reflected in your recent receipt of a 'Rights Respecting School' award. Pupils show a strong sense of social responsibility through their roles as eco warriors, digital police and buddies for pupils in other year groups. They also support a number of charitable causes. Pupils have shown a marked improvement in attendance as a result of a stronger focus on attendance in the autumn term. However, disadvantaged pupils remain more likely to be absent than their peers.

The vast majority of parents are extremely happy with the progress their children make and the care and support they receive from their teachers. You provide regular updates to parents through the school newsletter. In these letters, you openly respond to any questions and concerns they may have. One parent captured the views of many in writing: 'St Mary's is a happy, busy school with a lovely atmosphere that is welcoming and friendly. All staff are always very receptive to parental concerns or comments. They will always ensure they are available to chat and there is a good communication network. Everyone is on the same page. The children at the school have strong friendships, not only with others in their class, but across year groups and age ranges.'

Governors are committed to the values of the school. Your new chair of governors has carried out a review of governance and revised committee structures. As a result of these actions, governors are providing better support and challenge. This is

helping to build the momentum for further improvement. Your chair of the governing body meets you on a regular basis to explore a wide range of school issues. Governors have a good awareness of pupils' current progress and have a good oversight of provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. They are working with you to introduce more robust strategies, both to help families to improve attendance and to bring stricter approaches when school guidance is not followed. Recent changes in governance have resulted in some loss of expertise in checking the impact of pupil premium funding, although governors are working to sharpen work in this area.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Leaders make thorough checks on the suitability of adults working at the school and are suitably trained in safer recruitment. School leaders undergo appropriate training to enable them to carry out their safeguarding responsibilities effectively. Leaders have commissioned an audit of safeguarding practices from the local authority. Leaders also ensure that staff receive regular and up-to-date training on a range of safeguarding issues. Leaders follow up concerns over pupils' welfare, but, on occasions, records do not fully reflect the actions they have taken to ensure that pupils are safe.

Pupils spoken with say that they feel safe in school and their parents and carers agree. They say that bullying is rare and that staff are effective in addressing any potential instances of bullying. Pupils could describe how the school's work on raising awareness of their rights had created a supportive environment where equality was valued. Pupils have worked on initiatives, such as the 'digital police project', to raise their awareness of how to stay safe online and through the use of social media.

Inspection findings

- Your team has embedded a love of reading across the school. Teachers provide pupils with regular access to high-quality texts. Pupils read and investigate whole-class novels alongside regular opportunities to read individually. Teachers develop good links with parents to support wider reading at home. In lessons, pupils are regularly asked to read instructions, or extracts from texts, to their peers in class, and they show confidence in reading. Teachers have skilfully developed pupils' skills of inference and deduction. Highly effective teaching and a vibrant reading culture have enabled pupils to make consistently outstanding progress in reading.
- Your teachers have developed initiatives to support pupils' progress in writing. Leaders have given teachers clearer guidance to raise expectations of what pupils can achieve in writing. Pupils are now encouraged to use cursive handwriting from an early age and pupils' writing is displayed on class walls to provide examples of what they can achieve. Specific support is provided to help those pupils who need help with their fine motor skills to improve their writing. In books, there is evidence that pupils are making better progress. Girls often

display a confident control of vocabulary and grammar, sustained over extended pieces of writing. There is also evidence that boys and disadvantaged pupils are beginning to make better progress in their writing. Differences in their progress are diminishing, although smaller proportions are working at greater depths of understanding.

- Your mathematics subject leaders are introducing new strategies to increase opportunities for pupils to develop their reasoning and problem-solving skills. Leaders are using their partnership with a major local mathematics hub to visit other schools and work with specialists to develop their subject expertise. They are sharing new approaches with colleagues and checking the effect of these methods on teaching and pupils' progress. In books, there is evidence that teachers are showing consistency in implementing many aspects of these new approaches. Pupils are aware of increasing opportunities to work on more challenging tasks, although there remains some variability in how effectively teachers are enabling pupils to work at greater depths of understanding.
- Pupils are making good progress at key stage 1. In 2018, there was a slight increase in the proportion of pupils working at greater depth. However, the picture remained variable for different groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils. Overall, pupils develop good learning routines and develop positive attitudes to learning that supports their progress at key stage 2.
- In 2018, an increasing proportion of children achieved a good level of development in the early years, although there was a decline in the numbers exceeding early learning goals. Teachers are introducing new approaches to develop pupils' emergent writing skills through focused writing activities. In addition, teachers are introducing greater elements of challenge. This was reflected in children working on more complex mathematics problems and exploring length, sequences and patterns when creating paper chains. Teachers are creating stimulating opportunities for children to learn and play, alongside increasing opportunities to develop number and word skills.
- Leaders are developing a broad and balanced curriculum that is helping pupils to acquire knowledge, skills and understanding across a wide range of subjects. Leaders monitor curriculum coverage on a regular basis and are working with teachers to build a deeper understanding of the knowledge and skills that pupils need to attain. In workbooks, there are signs that pupils acquire good curriculum knowledge in history and geography in key stage 2. In Year 6, pupils enthusiastically explored and discussed the contrasts between different theories of evolution in their science lesson. At key stage 1, some of the wider curriculum coverage in books was less developed, although leaders are continuing to monitor and explore how the curriculum can be enhanced.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- written records fully reflect the actions taken to address any concerns over pupils' welfare

- they provide increasing opportunities for pupils to work at greater depths of understanding
- they build upon recent improvements in writing, particularly for boys, in English and across the wider curriculum
- they continue to diminish differences in the progress, attainment and attendance of disadvantaged pupils.

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

Malcolm Kirtley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

As part of the inspection, I explored the actions taken by leaders to improve pupils' progress in writing. I also examined the strategies that had contributed to such strong outcomes in reading at the end of key stage 2 and pupils' progress in mathematics. In addition, I looked at the quality of teaching and pupils' progress in key stage 1 and in the early years. I also looked at the knowledge and skills acquired by pupils in the wider curriculum.

During the inspection, I met with you, your deputy headteacher and a wide range of middle leaders. I also spoke with six members of the governing body, including the chair. I held a meeting with a group of pupils and discussed pupils' learning with them in lessons. I met the education development partner from the local authority. I looked, with you and your deputy headteacher, at learning in lessons. I also looked at pupils' work in books. I examined school improvement priorities and discussed pupils' progress. I looked at documents, including the school's self-evaluation and attendance records. I examined safeguarding documents, including the single central record. I considered the 33 responses to Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire and the 26 free-text responses from parents. I also met four parents.