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Mrs Louise Byrne
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Byrne

Short inspection of St Margaret Mary's Catholic Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 9 January 2019, 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 December 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have a clear vision for the school, based on a strong set of principles, which are consistently reflected in your self-evaluation and development plans. Since your appointment, you have made significant changes to the structures, systems and teaching approaches within the school. In doing so, you have taken a reflective approach and not pursued innovation for its own sake. As a result, you have won the support of your staff and governors. You have also arrested the decline in results. These have improved over the past two years and the indications are that this trend is being maintained. You are supported by an experienced and able deputy headteacher. In a very short time, you have established a close working relationship, where you are both able to make effective use of your respective skills. You share a very clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. This is based on careful and objective analysis of a wide range of information, which you use very effectively to identify priorities for improvement and to check on the impact of your actions. The governors are dedicated and well informed and provide you with the right balance of challenge and support.

Parents and carers hold the school in high regard. All those who spoke to me were very pleased with the provision made for their children. They highlighted the friendliness and approachability of staff, the happy atmosphere in the school and the care and support provided for their children. All the parents who completed the online questionnaire said that the school is well led and managed and every one of them would recommend it to others.

Pupils' behaviour is of a very high standard. In lessons, pupils work with concentration and interest. When they are moving around the school, even the youngest do so quietly and sensibly. The children in the early years show considerable maturity and self-control for their age. All the pupils I spoke to were polite and happy to engage in conversation. They presented their own ideas clearly and listened carefully to each other.

At the time of the last inspection, leaders were asked to: ensure that the most able pupils achieve well, especially in mathematics; improve the performance of disadvantaged pupils; and improve the standard of boys' writing. You have been successful in addressing the first two areas but the standards of writing in the school are still not as high as they should be.

With advice and support from external consultants, the leader for mathematics has revised the planning and ways of teaching the subject. Now there is a greater focus than before on problem solving and relating mathematics to real-life situations. This was evident during our visits to classrooms, where pupils applied their understanding of number to calculating sums of money. They approached the work with a high level of enthusiasm, which reflected the increasingly positive attitude to mathematics that you have noted in your surveys of pupils' views. The impact of the revised approach is seen in the improvements in mathematics results over the past three years. Last summer, the proportions of pupils reaching and exceeding the expected standards in the national tests were close to the averages for pupils across the country. Your figures show that the most able pupils currently in Year 2 have made considerable progress since they entered the Nursery. This indicates that the improvements you have made are having a continuing effect.

Your strategy for supporting disadvantaged pupils is detailed and well written. It includes precise targets for raising these pupils' attainment and for narrowing the gap between their performance and that of other pupils nationally. Progress towards these targets is reviewed at least termly and additional support provided to pupils who are falling behind. Your analysis shows that from 2016 to 2018, there was a clear rise in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils reaching the expected levels in national tests. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils also narrowed. The figures for pupils currently in the school show that this positive trend is continuing. There is clear evidence that the disadvantaged pupils currently in Year 2 have made considerable progress, particularly in reading and mathematics, during their time at the school.

In response to the need to improve boys' writing, your main focus has been on extending pupils' vocabulary, stimulating their imagination, building their confidence and encouraging them to talk about their ideas before putting them down on paper. This was seen in action in the early years, where a group of boys, dressed as police and fire officers, were tackling an imaginary blaze. In another instance, two pupils re-enacted a plane journey to Greece. In both cases, the children explained what they were doing, with a high level of enthusiasm, using well-formulated sentences and interesting vocabulary. The impact of this approach has yet to be reflected in

the standards of writing across the school. Although improvements have been made in national tests, they have not been as strong as in reading and mathematics. This is the case not only for boys but also for girls and disadvantaged pupils, indicating that writing is an area for further improvement in the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

All the parents who responded to the online questionnaire, or who spoke to me, said that their children are safe at school. The pupils I met confirmed this. They learn how to avoid danger near roads and railways and when using the internet and social media. They know which teachers to contact if they have any worries or concerns and are confident that they will receive whatever help they need. Fire practices are held regularly, and the school recently received a visit from the local fire service and the police. As one parent wrote: 'This helped the children understand their important role and showed that these services are friendly and helpful to communities.' You have well-organised systems for checking on the suitability of adults to work with children. Access to the building is carefully controlled and the security of the site has been further improved since you took up your post. You and your colleagues work closely with relevant agencies to provide appropriate support for pupils and families who need additional help.

Inspection findings

- Results in the early years have risen over the past two years, particularly in mathematics and reading. I wanted to know whether this improvement is being maintained. You were able to demonstrate that it is. The children currently in Reception are performing at least as well as their counterparts at this time last year. As their attainment was lower on entry to the Nursery than that of their predecessors, they have had to make greater progress to get to the same point. Our visit to the early years showed that indoor and outdoor areas were used well. The children were involved constructively in a variety of well-organised activities that provided an appropriate balance between those arranged by adults and those initiated by the children themselves. The children had a wide range of opportunities to develop reading, writing and mathematics skills and were making clear progress. They were extremely well behaved and showed high levels of concentration. The children talked with enthusiasm about their own activities but also questioned adults and others about what they were doing.
- Phonics results declined from 2015 to 2017 but improved last year. I was interested to know whether this improvement is being maintained. In your own checks, you have identified inconsistencies in the teaching of phonics and this is an area for improvement in your school development plan. Visits to classrooms confirmed that this is an appropriate priority.
- Results at the end of Year 2 have improved over the past two years. I wanted confirmation that this improvement is being maintained. You provided convincing evidence that the pupils currently in Year 2 have made definite progress since they entered the Nursery, with progress in reading being particularly strong. However, as in the rest of the school, progress in writing has been weaker.

- The last area that I discussed with you was attendance. In 2015 and 2016, attendance was below average. In the case of disadvantaged pupils' attendance, the school was in the worst 10% of schools nationally. There have been improvements over the past two years and, in 2018, attendance was in line with the national average. The figure for persistent absence was better than average. You were able to show me that attendance figures for last term were in line with the figures for the same time last year. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils has improved but is still lower than for other pupils. The proportions of disadvantaged pupils who are late or persistently absent are far smaller than at this time last year. Therefore, the strategies that you have put in place continue to have a positive impact.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- across the school, progress in writing is increased, so that the proportions of Year 2 pupils reaching the expected levels and higher standards in external tests are at least in line with national averages.

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

Yours sincerely

Aelwyn Pugh
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I examined a range of documentation and discussed your self-evaluation with you and the deputy headteacher. I met four governors, including the chair and vice chair of the governing body, and spoke to representatives of the local authority and the archdiocese. You and I visited lessons to observe teaching and learning and, together with the deputy headteacher, we looked at a random sample of books from each year group. I discussed behaviour, attendance and safeguarding arrangements with you, the deputy headteacher and the learning mentor, and examined the single central record of staff. I met eight pupils, chosen at random from Year 2, and spoke to staff and pupils as I walked round the school. I examined the 29 responses to Parent View and spoke to 20 parents, relatives and child minders as they brought their children to school.