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Mr Paul Loughran
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Dear Mr Loughran

Short inspection of St Michael's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 20 February 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 November 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in specific areas. This may indicate that the school has improved significantly overall. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

St Michael's Catholic Primary School provides a warm and nurturing environment for all pupils. Since the previous inspection, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils has risen steadily and is now more than double the national average. Consequently, you and your staff are committed to ensuring that all pupils get the best possible start to their education. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage in their education, emotionally, socially and academically.

You provide strong and effective leadership and have a clear vision for continued improvement. Under your direction, the school has improved significantly since the previous inspection. Quite simply, in 2018, the progress made by pupils at the end of key stage 2 in reading, writing and mathematics was outstanding and among the best in the country. Particularly noteworthy was the progress that disadvantaged pupils made in reading and mathematics, which was significantly above the national average for other pupils.

Your staff are a close and tight-knit team. They are very proud to be part of this school and share your aims and ambitions. Several told me about the opportunities

afforded to them to visit European countries to learn about alternative approaches to education. What they have learned has influenced their practice. The following comment sums up the feelings of your staff: 'We want the children to have a real love of learning, high aspirations and the belief that they can be anything they want to be.'

Virtually all parents and carers have the highest admiration for you and your staff. They are quite rightly proud of the progress that their children make. Parents described the levels of communication between the school and themselves as 'excellent'. They told me that they are kept very well informed about their children's progress. Parents of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities were keen to tell me about the 'superb' levels of support afforded to their children. The following comment typifies the views of many: 'A truly amazing school with dedicated staff, outstanding results and first-class pastoral care.' This view is also shared by your school improvement partner, who described the school as 'a shining example' to others.

As we toured the school, I observed pupils who displayed a real love of learning and a thirst for knowledge. Relationships at all levels are highly respectful and the standards of behaviour that I observed on the day of the inspection were excellent.

You have created an atmosphere of excitement for learning among pupils. They took delight in telling me about the exciting range of trips you and your staff arrange to inspire their learning and arouse their curiosity. Pupils thoroughly enjoy coming to school and feel safe. They talked to me in depth about the knowledge and skills they are acquiring in subjects such as science, history and geography. They proudly showed me work in their books and on display which confirms that this is the case. Pupils are very aware of the school's core values and talked about what they mean to them on a personal basis. Raising money for a wide variety of charitable causes is a regular activity at St Michael's. This helps pupils appreciate that there are many people facing challenging circumstances.

Like you, governors are keen that all pupils achieve their best. They visit the school regularly and have a secure understanding of its many strengths and priorities for development. They set you challenging, but realistic, targets, which are regularly reviewed. They are very supportive of you, but not afraid to ask challenging questions should the need arise.

Following the previous inspection, you were asked to ensure that all pupils were challenged in lessons and that there were more opportunities for them to write across the curriculum. Both issues have been resolved. Pupils now write at length in subjects such as science, history and geography. The significant improvement in published results demonstrates that pupils are now challenged to think more deeply in lessons.

Safeguarding is effective.

No stone is left unturned to ensure that pupils are safe. The pastoral team offer excellent levels of care to vulnerable families and work well with outside agencies. This ensures that the needs of families in difficult circumstances are dealt with efficiently. All staff are aware that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. They have a good understanding of the indicators of abuse and the procedures to follow. They also talk confidently about issues relating to extremism and terrorism. The entrance to the school is secure and visitors' credentials are closely checked.

There are comprehensive procedures in place for the recruitment and selection of staff. No new member of staff is allowed to start working at the school until all relevant checks have been completed.

Pupils learn how to keep themselves safe. Visitors regularly come into the school to talk to them about healthy relationships and the dangers of alcohol and drug misuse. E-safety is well promoted. A filtering system is in place to protect pupils when they are online. Pupils are also aware of the dangers of disclosing their password or personal information to others.

Inspection findings

- My key lines of enquiry came as no surprise to you. From very low starting points in some areas of their learning, most children make strong progress in the early years. However, in 2018, the proportion of children achieving a good level of development was just below the national average. In addition, outcomes for boys in writing and reading lagged considerably behind those of girls. Swift action has been taken to address these issues. For example, you have introduced a wider range of writing activities linked to boys' interests. Staff provide additional support for boys to develop their fine motor skills to enable them to hold writing tools correctly. To develop boys' reading skills, you have provided different types of reading material which appeal more to their interests, such as comics. Staff are working with parents to encourage them to share bedtime stories with their children. Reading a book independently at the start of the school day has been incorporated into the daily routine.
- While observing the early years, I saw some of these initiatives in action. For example, boys were eagerly sharing books with staff and writing party invitations while dressed as policemen. The school's own assessment information and work in children's learning journals show that these initiatives are beginning to bear fruit. The challenge for the school is to ensure that these improving outcomes in boys' reading and writing are built on and sustained to make sure that a greater proportion of children achieve a good level of development. Consequently, this remains an area for improvement.
- In 2018, the proportion of pupils reaching greater depth at the end of key stage 1 in mathematics was above the national average and broadly in line with it for reading. However, the proportion reaching greater depth in writing was slightly below the national average. You quickly put in place initiatives to improve outcomes for the most able children in both reading and writing. For example,

staff have had additional training to develop further their skills in the teaching of reading and writing. More demanding texts have been purchased to challenge the most able pupils and there are now designated reading areas in classrooms. 'Writer of the week' has been introduced, with examples of this pupil's work being displayed at the front of the school. Work in a sample of pupils' books and the schools' own assessment information show that the most able pupils are making stronger progress in writing. I listened to some of the most able pupils in Year 2 read. They read with fluency and expression and their comprehension skills are developing well. Pupils were able to predict what might happen next in the plot and talked to me about their favourite books and authors. The books that these pupils read are challenging and helping to develop their love of reading.

- You place strong emphasis on helping pupils appreciate the diversity of the world in which they live. Through the curriculum, they learn about different faiths, such as Islam, Sikhism and Judaism. 'Equality trees', are displayed in all classrooms. In an age-appropriate and meaningful way, these promote respect for differences, such as disability and families with same-sex parents. From my discussions with key stage 2 pupils, it is clear that they understand some of the different types of family within our society. You have established links with other schools which have a significant proportion of pupils from different minority ethnic backgrounds. Such effective practice helps to deepen pupils' understanding of cultural diversity.
- To meet the needs of pupils in the school, significant changes have been made to the teaching of subjects in the wider curriculum. All these subjects, such as history and geography, are now taught discretely. Teachers have also had additional training from subject specialists to ensure that they have the confidence to teach these subjects in depth. The role of middle leaders of subjects in the wider curriculum is developing well. For example, they monitor the quality of teaching in their area of responsibility, review planning and scrutinise pupils' work. However, procedures to monitor the knowledge and skills that pupils are acquiring as they move through the school are at an early stage of development.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- outcomes in boys' reading and writing in the early years improve further so that an even greater proportion of children achieve a good level of development
- middle leaders of subjects in the wider curriculum develop stronger systems for monitoring the development of subject-specific skills and knowledge across year groups.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheila Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, staff and members of the governing body. I also had a telephone conversation with your school improvement partner. I had informal discussions with parents as they brought their children to school. Together, we visited the early years and some key stage 2 classes to see the learning that was taking place. I listened to pupils from Year 2 read and looked at examples of pupils' work in books and on display. I reviewed a range of documentation, including the single central record, and the school's self-evaluation and development plans. I took account of the school's own assessment information relating to pupils' progress and attainment, as well as the published data. I also took account of the 89 responses from parents, 86 responses from pupils and 19 responses from staff to the Ofsted online questionnaires.