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Mrs Ruth Whyte
Headteacher
St Joseph's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Billingham
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Dear Mrs Whyte

Short inspection of St Joseph's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Billingham

Following my visit to the school on 1 March 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in January 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. This is a result of your unwavering determination to continually improve the quality of education in the school, since taking up your appointment in September 2014. Your effective leadership has been a key part of the developments in the school. You enable and empower other leaders to bring about successful improvements in their areas of responsibility. Collectively, you are dedicated to improving standards. As one governor told me, 'At St Joseph's, we are committed to ensuring that the young people in our care have the best possible opportunities that we can give.'

St Joseph's is a vibrant, inclusive and cohesive community. As parents and carers, pupils and leaders all affirm, the school is a family. Leaders, including governors, have established an effective partnership between home, school and the local parish community. Pupils are happy and enjoy coming to school. Parents value the contact that they have with your staff each morning to ask any questions or share any concerns. Parents who spoke with me during the inspection were very positive about the school. Comments included, 'St Joseph's is a family-orientated school with welcoming staff,' and, 'We wouldn't pick another school — this place is so caring and welcoming.'

At the previous inspection, leaders were asked to raise standards for the most able pupils in key stage 1. You have worked with staff to help them to provide appropriate challenge for the most able pupils. Learning is now well planned. Tasks are structured to ensure that they effectively meet the needs of all pupils. Focused

monitoring and feedback to staff through work scrutiny and other activities have given leaders an accurate picture of the standard of teaching and pupils' work. They have also sharpened teachers' classroom practice. Consequently, the proportion of pupils achieving greater depth in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of key stage 1 is steadily improving.

Inspectors also asked leaders to ensure that pupils know how to be successful in their learning. Inspectors recommended that pupils should check how well they are doing in order to accelerate and deepen their own understanding and progress. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about their learning and now know what, and how, to improve. They particularly liked 'ii' or 'immediate intervention', and say that this helps them to learn, especially in mathematics. Pupils describe how if they do not understand a concept, or struggle with a certain aspect of the work, teachers or teaching assistants provide them with immediate individual support. As a result, they are better prepared for the next lesson and more readily able to move on in their learning.

Pupils are courteous, considerate and confident. They work hard in lessons and present their work carefully and with pride. Pupils enjoy positive relationships with one another and with members of staff. St Joseph's is a happy, welcoming and friendly school, where pupils care about themselves and others. They appreciate that they are known by name, and valued, respected and cared for by all staff. In keeping with your Catholic ethos, pupils see the school as a place where equality and inclusion are at the very centre of your work.

The vast majority of pupils enjoy coming to school. You are clear with parents and pupils about the importance of good attendance. Good attendance is celebrated with pupils. Leaders now work more closely with parents and carers to ensure that pupils attend school regularly. You rightly challenge any parent who chooses to take their child on holiday during term time. Leaders' monitoring of attendance is detailed and focused. You have recently introduced new incentives for good attendance. The 'attendance piggy bank' encourages a sense of healthy competition between your classes, to see which class has the best attendance. Despite these efforts, the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school is above the national average.

Governors are committed and dedicated. They know the school well and are resolute in their desire to see St Joseph's go from strength to strength. Governors work very closely with you and other leaders. They carry out regular visits to the school, talking to staff, pupils and parents. They attend regular training and ensure that they are well informed about all aspects of the school's work. As a result, they offer a good balance of challenge and support to school leaders.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You have established a strong culture of safeguarding where staff are vigilant and pupils are safe. Leaders have ensured that all appropriate checks

are in place for all members of staff. Leaders have an in-depth knowledge of local safeguarding issues and ensure that staff receive appropriate high-quality training. As a result, staff immediately raise and share any concerns that they have. They know that leaders will respond quickly and effectively to ensure the welfare of all pupils, especially the most vulnerable.

As designated safeguarding lead, you have a clear and detailed understanding of child protection matters. You ensure that concerns are recorded assiduously so that you can form a clear picture of the support needed for pupils who may be at risk of harm. This detailed information helps you to make referrals when appropriate. Leaders call on external agencies when necessary. You are not afraid to take advice or offer challenge to ensure that all pupils in your care are kept safe from harm. Records are carefully organised and appropriately stored so that actions can be monitored and reviewed.

Pupils know how to keep themselves safe. Those that I spoke with during the inspection said that they feel safe in school. They have a good understanding of how to stay safe, including when working online or on social media. Pupils say that bullying is rare. They accept that pupils fall out and can sometimes be unkind. However, they were unanimous in their view that bullying rarely takes place at St Joseph's and, when it does, teachers sort it out very quickly.

Inspection findings

- Leaders have an uncompromising and relentless drive to improve standards across the school. They are rightly ambitious for every pupil. This has led to a trend of improving outcomes over the last three years. In 2018, Year 6 pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics was well above the national average at the expected level.
- Relationships between staff and children in early years are strong. When I visited the Reception class, children were engaged in a variety of activities. The children on the reading activity table were using their decoding skills to sound out three-letter words and match them to the pictures. They were keen to show their reading skills. The children read words such as 'fin', 'pen', 'lips' and 'bus'. They were also keen to tell me that sharks and fish have fins. There is a strong emphasis on language and vocabulary development. Children talk and play together imaginatively. The children asked me if I wanted to listen to 'George Michael' and 'Elvis', the class puppets, tell a story.
- Leaders have recently improved the outdoor area to further support language development and early writing. They have revised their approach to the teaching of writing across the school, including in early years. In particular, children in the Nursery and the Reception class are given increased guidance about how to hold a pencil and form letters. This leads to the start of good habits that enhance the quality of their initial handwriting. As a result, children make good progress in both the Nursery and the Reception class. However, the recently introduced improvements need to be embedded, so that the proportion of children achieving a good level of development by the end of their Reception Year continues to

increase so that it is in line with, or above, the national average.

- The teaching of reading is a strength across the school. Since the last inspection, the Year 1 phonics screening check results have risen year on year. In 2017 and 2018, they were well above the national average. In 2018, the proportion of pupils achieving at the expected standard in reading at the end of key stage 2 was also well above the national average. Pupils demonstrate a love of reading and were able to talk knowledgeably about their favourite books and why they enjoy reading. Those who read to me were able to do so with fluency and expression. They were also able to work out the meaning of unfamiliar words such as 'talon' and 'tribute'. Pupils talked about the different literary devices an author might use and were able to spot examples within the text they had read. Reading is taught effectively. Consequently, pupils progress well, and above all, they enjoy reading.
- Pupils' work, both in books and on display, shows how staff readily acknowledge and value pupils' work and efforts in homework and classwork. In September 2018, you revised the school's approach to homework. As well as regular literacy and numeracy homework, you have developed tasks that are cross-curricular and varied. These enable pupils to apply a range of skills, including creative skills as well as their knowledge and understanding of the topics that they are studying. From creating a Roman shield or designing and making a house from the Great Fire of London in 1666, to helping someone at home to cook a meal or bake, these flexible homework tasks are challenging, but enable parents to take a more active role in their children's learning.
- Leaders have thoroughly reviewed the school's approach to writing. Despite this, in our meeting, you told me that you are 'still working on this'. However, the quality of staff training has had a positive impact on classroom practice. The early years leader ensures that children take part in activities which will inspire them to write. For example, children were learning about the different animals in the jungle and they were then able to write short sentences using this experience.
- The teaching of writing in upper key stage 2 is strong. Teachers model and encourage the use of, as one teacher put it, 'carefully, specifically and purposefully chosen vocabulary'. Pupils are confident in the editing or 'up-levelling' as you call it, of their work. Teachers ensure that pupils' writing has a strong sense of purpose by providing real audiences and contexts, for example in writing a letter of complaint about poor internet service or writing about a scene from 'Paddington Bear'. Pupils actively seek to enrich their writing and engage their audience through the vocabulary choices they make. Pupils' books show no evident differences in the quality of writing between boys and girls. However, despite improved attainment, pupils' progress in writing is not as strong as in reading and mathematics. The proportion of pupils achieving the higher standard in writing at the end of key stage 2 has been well below the national average for the last three years.
- Leaders' actions to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment have led to lessons that inspire pupils to work hard and to achieve in both their personal and academic development. The personal, social and health education

opportunities on offer contribute effectively to pupils' well-being. Year 5 and Year 6 pupils enjoy their weekly 'Game of Actual Life' lessons, where they can apply their numeracy skills to real-life situations. These activities help them to learn to manage money, and to save and spend wisely. Over time, pupils develop a love of learning and a desire to work to the best of their ability. When they leave St Joseph's at the end of Year 6, they are well prepared for the challenges of secondary school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to challenge and support the parents of pupils who do not attend school regularly
- they continue to embed the improvements in early years, so that the proportion of children achieving a good level of development at the end of their Reception Year continues to increase
- teachers continue to deepen pupils' skills and knowledge in writing, so that pupils' progress improves, and a greater proportion reach the higher standard by the end of key stage 2.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chair of the board of trustees, the director of education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Stockton-on-Tees. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Daniel Murray
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your deputy headteacher. I met with three governors, including the chair of the governing body. I also met with your early years leader. Together with you, we visited classrooms to observe teaching and learning and to look at pupils' work. I also looked, in depth, at pupils' writing books and other work. I met with your independent school improvement partner. I spoke by telephone with the deputy director for education in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. I met with a group of pupils from Years 3 to 6. I listened to eight pupils read. I also listened informally to pupils read during my visits to lessons.

Consideration was given to the nine free-text responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and the 16 questionnaire responses from staff.

Consideration was also given to the 18 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire. I spoke with several parents at the start of the school day.

I evaluated recent information in relation to pupils' progress throughout the school, the school's self-evaluation document, the school improvement plan and a sample of monitoring records. I also met with you as designated safeguarding leader and reviewed documentation and records about how you keep your pupils safe.