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Mrs Eve Alderson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Alderson

Short inspection of St Bede's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Sacriston

Following my visit to the school on 14 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 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. Since becoming headteacher, first in an acting capacity and then substantively in March 2017, your passion for ensuring that pupils gain the best education possible has inspired members of staff to do the very best they can. Staff say that your trust and support has been instrumental in helping them to become more effective. They have every confidence in your leadership and praise the many opportunities you offer to them to develop professionally. All adults feel valued and work closely as a mutually supportive team.

You have been particularly successful in developing subject leadership. Subject leaders have received appropriate training, so they can bring about improvements in their areas of responsibility. A key aspect of this training has centred on extending their expertise in evaluating the quality of teaching, pupils' progress and the curriculum. As a result, subject leaders now confidently undertake regular scrutiny of pupils' books and use this information to improve the curriculum further.

Reports from subject leaders and your own regular monitoring of teaching and learning contribute to an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and areas which require further development. Your use of external consultants to provide independent checks on the school's work also adds to your in-depth knowledge of all aspects of school life. Your regular monitoring of pupils' progress ensures that prompt action is taken for pupils in danger of falling behind, or those who require more support, so that they continue to make

good gains. You deploy staff well to ensure that those pupils who need the most assistance receive it.

You and the governing body work well together. You share the same aspirations for the school and you welcome the appropriate challenge and support governors provide. Most governors have been appointed since the previous inspection and are keen to be as effective as possible. They undertake training to sharpen their skills and seek external reassurance that the leaders' evaluations are accurate and that they have identified the right priorities to improve further. The re-organisation of the committee structure is an example of how governors adapt their procedures after careful reflection. Their overview of the school's work is based on wide-ranging knowledge. This is gained through regular visits where they talk to pupils, parents and staff, and through incisive questioning of school leaders. Governors carefully check that plans for improvement stay on track and make the desired difference to pupils' learning.

Your aim that pupils leave school being well rounded and ready for society is evident in the wide range of opportunities you provide for them. Pupils have many opportunities to take responsibility and contribute towards the richness of school life. For example, the school sports organising crew help pupils to check the outcome of their daily mile run, and the school council choose the reward for the winning house team each term. Pupils are fully engaged in developing the outdoor play areas and in supporting the school to gain plastic-free status.

You and your team have largely addressed the issues for improvement identified at the last inspection. You were asked to move learning on more rapidly when pupils were ready for a new task. In most year groups this is evident in the strong progress seen in books and in the greater level of challenge to the most able pupils. You have identified that more needs to be done in some year groups, and action is being taken to deal with this.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Suitable and stringent arrangements are in place to recruit staff. Staff training is up to date and regular reminders alert staff and give them confidence in responding to any concerns that may arise. You are persistent when you need to follow up safeguarding issues, and you work well with a range of different agencies so that pupils' welfare is maintained.

Pupils say they feel safe in school, and this is endorsed by nearly every parent. Pupils and adults have strong, trusting relationships. Trained peer mediators are in the playground and valued by pupils. Pupils know that they can use the worry box to raise concerns if they do not want to approach an adult directly. They also gain a very good understanding of how to keep themselves safe. For example, older pupils can learn how to give basic life support. Junior road safety officers help pupils to learn about crossing the road safely. Pupils understand well that there are dangers in using the internet and that there are actions they can take to keep themselves safe. The curriculum to support pupils' health and emotional well-being is notable and includes opportunities to learn about relaxation, the importance of sleep and cooking healthy family meals.

Pupils' behaviour in school is good. They are attentive in class and want to do well. The outdoor playground, with its garden of curiosities, mud kitchen and climbing equipment, is a significant feature of the school. It is highly appreciated by pupils, and staff report that it has improved behaviour both outdoors and indoors.

In the online questionnaire, Parent View, a small number of parents indicated that the school does not deal effectively with bullying. The evidence gathered during the inspection does not support this view. Pupils have a good understanding of what bullying is and say that there are few incidents. When they do occur, these are dealt with appropriately. Very detailed school records confirm this.

Inspection findings

- You responded promptly to outcomes in reading which were lower than in other subjects. Proportions reaching the expected standard have been below average in two of the last three years at the end of key stage 1. Proportions reaching the higher standard have also been below average in both key stage 1 and key stage 2. You commissioned a review of reading and responded effectively to the findings. The acting deputy headteacher has led and monitored developments well, enhancing her own expertise through attendance at relevant training. She has a keen awareness of what has been achieved already and what still needs to be done.
- To improve outcomes in reading, you prioritised the development of a love of reading among pupils and their families so that they read more widely and frequently. A broad range of initiatives has been implemented to achieve this. Reading at home has been incentivised, with pupils keen to gain rewards. The pupils I spoke to commented that they now read more as a result. There have also been a number of family events where pupils and parents read together. For example, there was a 'St Bede's Reads' event linked to World Book Day, which was attended by over half of all parents. Pupils are encouraged to read books which interest and engage but which are also at an appropriately challenging level. The pupils who read to me had chosen texts as diverse as a novel by David Walliams, a non-fiction book about the oceans and a book about fairies.
- The second aspect for improvement was the teaching of specific reading skills. Training has improved staff knowledge and skills, particularly in helping pupils make inferences and deductions from a text. The teaching of reading has also been reorganised so that there is more time devoted to teaching these skills. Pupils who are in danger of falling behind or who struggle with reading receive good-quality tailored additional help. A more systematic approach has contributed to a greater proportion of pupils working at expectations for their age in both key stages 1 and 2. However, the quality of teaching is not yet consistent across the school. In some year groups the most able pupils are not challenged with sufficiently demanding work. Occasionally, staff are not clear about what they want pupils to learn, and this leads to pupils being uncertain about why they are completing an activity.
- Standards in writing in key stage 1 have been similar to those in reading. Leaders reviewed pupils' work and identified that there were not enough opportunities to write at length. Sometimes, most-able pupils have been given too much assistance to complete a piece of writing. The work scrutiny the headteacher and I conducted confirmed that

there are now more extended writing opportunities and less support for most-able pupils in the majority of year groups. Leaders know where additional help is required and this has already been put in place.

- Leaders have prioritised science as an area for improvement. Standards have been below average in key stage 1 and children's understanding of the world was below average at the end of the Reception Year in 2018. The headteacher and science leader also identified that there were not enough opportunities for pupils to conduct investigations and enquiries. The level of challenge was not consistent in each year group. The science leader has supported staff in developing their teaching of the subject so that it is now good, and in most year groups all pupils are challenged effectively. For example, when older pupils were investigating the effects of air resistance, they were asked to consider independent, dependent and controlled variables. Pupils' knowledge of how the heart works was enhanced by a workshop where a cow's heart was dissected so they could see the organ at first-hand. Occasionally, the most able pupils complete undemanding activities and are not moved on to more challenging tasks soon enough.
- In the Reception Year, an analysis of lower standards in children's understanding of the world indicated that there were not enough opportunities for exploration and investigation. As a result, the early years leader revised the curriculum so that now there are many more planned opportunities to enhance children's scientific knowledge. Outdoor play activities now have a stronger link to science understanding. However, the resources and equipment available indoors are not as varied and provide fewer opportunities for exploration and investigation.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the most able pupils are suitable challenged to think more deeply in all year groups in reading, writing and science
- adults and pupils are clear about the purpose behind different learning activities to improve reading
- a wider range of resources is available in the Reception Year classroom to promote children's scientific understanding.

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

Susan Waugh
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the acting deputy headteacher and groups of staff. You and I scrutinised some pupils' writing and visited each class. The leader for science and I scrutinised pupils' work and discussed developments in that subject. I met with six governors and had a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. I spoke with pupils about their views of the school, including their views of pupils' behaviour. A group of pupils read to me and shared their reading records and workbooks. I considered the 45 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I also considered 14 responses from the online staff survey and 50 responses from the online pupils' survey. Various documents were considered, relating to safeguarding, teaching and governance, including the school's self-evaluation review, the school improvement plan and pupils' recent achievement in statutory assessments. I also looked at the school's website.