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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Sarah Cross
Interim Headteacher
St James Church of England Primary School, Handsworth
Sandwell Road
Birmingham
West Midlands
B21 8NH

Dear Miss Cross

Short inspection of St James Church of England Primary School, Handsworth

Following my visit to the school on 8 May 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 April 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You were appointed to the post of interim headteacher in September 2018. You and your leadership team are ambitious for the school and have high expectations of all your pupils. You have successfully shared these high expectations with all your staff, who reflect your determination to do the very best for all the pupils in the school.

Parents, carers, staff and pupils are extremely positive about the school and its leaders. The parents I spoke to at the beginning of the school day all said they were very happy with the school and would recommend it to other parents. They commented on how well their children were doing. Staff are very proud to work at the school. All staff who responded to Ofsted's online survey said they enjoyed working at the school.

Pupils are polite and well behaved. They work well together and value opportunities to learn from and with each other. The pupils I spoke to were eager to tell me about their learning. They enjoy the trips on offer, which are linked to the topics covered in class. They told me that it is okay to be different in school and to come from different cultures and have different beliefs. Pupils enjoy opportunities to learn about a range of religions and visit a variety of places of worship. They all said that they were very happy in the school and new pupils are always made to feel welcome and supported.

At the time of the last inspection, when you were in post as deputy headteacher, inspectors made three recommendations. The first was that teachers kept a close track of pupils' learning, particularly that of the most able pupils, and adapt activities quickly if pupils were finding them too hard or too easy. Leaders have provided training for all staff that has helped raise the level of challenge offered to pupils. You have purchased resources to develop key subject areas. As a result, pupils are now given activities that successfully challenge and support them. Teachers now regularly ask the most able pupils to start tasks independently, and they rise to the challenge of demanding work.

Inspectors also recommended that the school should give pupils more opportunities to apply their English and mathematical skills in other subjects. You have created a strong cross-curricular topic approach to learning. The application of, in particular, writing and mathematical skills is developed well and helps pupils to see the links in their learning. The skills of subject leaders in areas other than English and mathematics should be further developed. This will enable these leaders to ensure that their individual subjects are contributing effectively to each topic.

Governors are supportive and proud of the school. They know the school well and have a secure understanding of its strengths and areas for improvement. They share your high aspirations. They value the positivity that is a feature of leaders and staff and how this is supporting improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Safeguarding is a strength of the school. Staff training is up to date. Staff are vigilant and report any concerns swiftly. You and your safeguarding team work well with other agencies. Your decision to develop an inclusion team has successfully supported vulnerable pupils and families. All pupils I spoke to said they had an adult they would talk to if they had a worry.

Pupils say they feel very safe in the school. They know how to keep themselves safe online and the importance of learning about stranger danger, fire safety, healthy eating and personal hygiene. Pupils felt that bullying did not happen in the school but knew that sometimes pupils fall out with each other. They were confident that any incidents between pupils would be resolved quickly by adults in the school.

We discussed pupils' attendance. You and your team have taken strong actions to encourage full attendance. Attendance is improving, and you rigorously follow up any absence. Leaders are tenacious in tracking any pupils who are missing education and support families who are in challenging situations. You use rewards and your rich curriculum to encourage high attendance. As a result, rates of attendance are now close to national figures, and the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is reducing. Behaviour has improved. There have been no fixed-term exclusions this academic year.

Inspection findings

- The first aspect I looked at was the progress children make in Reception classes. Children enter the school with attainment that is typically below that expected for their age. Many children have little or no English language skills upon entry. The proportion of children who achieve a good level of development by the end of Reception is below the national average. The early years leader is a passionate and dedicated leader. He values the opportunities he has been given to develop his skills and visits other early years providers to share best practice. This has supported the refinements and accuracy of your baseline assessments. Staff track carefully children's progress and have become more competent in adapting learning to meet children's needs and interests. Early phonics is well taught, and children are now given more opportunities to develop fully the early listening skills required to make progress.
- The learning environment is attractive and language rich. The early years curriculum is well planned and sufficiently broad. Children make secure progress from their starting points. They are happy and confident learners. Children's books show they make strong progress in writing and mathematics. Leaders have established high expectations of standards in letter and number formation. However, there is still more to do to enhance progress for all children, so that a greater proportion achieve a good level of development by the end of Reception and are fully prepared for life in Year 1.
- I also looked at writing and the progress pupils make in this subject. You have rightly identified this as a priority for the school. Leaders provide opportunities for staff to work with colleagues in the school and from other schools to moderate pupils' writing and to develop teachers' skills and understanding of challenge. Pupils' books show evidence of strong progress in non-fiction writing, but narrative writing is not as strong. Teachers teach spelling, punctuation and grammar effectively, and pupils understand grammatical rules. Pupils use these basic skills effectively in their work in English but do not consistently apply them in their writing in other subjects. Pupils' knowledge, understanding and use of a wider and more sophisticated vocabulary are less well developed. This restricts their chances of reaching the higher standard in writing.
- All leaders in the school, including governors, want to ensure that the positive outcomes attained in recent years are sustained and further enhanced. You and the governors are not complacent. You have considered carefully how topics can be adapted to enrich and excite pupils. You have integrated visits and introductory activities into the curriculum to ignite your pupils' interest and enhance their experiences. These opportunities help pupils to make strong progress. Pupils now confidently apply some of these skills across the curriculum. For example, pupils successfully linked facts they knew about Alfred the Great to write a monologue which they read out to their peers with confidence and expression. In another year group, pupils were accurately using mathematical knowledge and skills to support work on compasses and directions in a geography topic.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- children in the early years are supported to make as much progress as they can, so that a greater proportion of them reach a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year
- they further develop pupils' understanding and use of vocabulary, so that their writing is enriched, and more pupils write at the higher standard
- they enhance the leadership skills of middle leaders.

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

Yours sincerely

Tina Willmott
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your two deputy headteachers to discuss the school's effectiveness, school improvement planning and self-evaluation. I spoke with the chair of the governing body by telephone and met with one governor. I also met with a representative of Birmingham Education Partnership, who are commissioned by the local authority to provide you with support. I met with the early years leader in the company of one of your deputy head teachers to discuss children's progress and looked at examples of children's work. I observed pupils indoors during breaktime and spoke with a group of pupils from key stage 2 in the afternoon.

I visited nearly every class in the school, jointly with senior leaders. We observed pupils' learning, looked at their books and talked to pupils about their work. We spent time looking at English, mathematics and topic books from Years 1 to 6.

I spoke to parents at the start of the school day. There were five responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire Parent View. I considered the 24 responses to Ofsted's online staff survey. We discussed pupils' progress information, attendance data and monitoring information. I scrutinised staff recruitment arrangements and the schools' safeguarding procedures and documentation. I also studied governors' minutes.