

4 July 2019

Mrs Valerie Gibson
Headteacher
St Joseph's Catholic Infant School, Birtley
Mitchell Street
Birtley
Chester-le-Street
County Durham
DH3 1LU

Dear Mrs Gibson

Short inspection of St Joseph's Catholic Infant School, Birtley

Following my visit to the school on 3 July 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 May 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your strong leadership and management have ensured that the recommendations from the previous inspection have been swiftly acted upon, for example in the teaching of phonics. As you approach your retirement, you and the governors have put in place clear succession planning to ensure that any effect on the school is as minimal as possible. You have high aspirations for the staff and the pupils in your care. You have effectively managed the high turnover of teaching staff since the last inspection. Staff feel respected and valued. As you say, 'A happy teacher means a happy child.' By providing opportunities for reflection and enabling staff to progress their careers through access to professional courses, you have secured this. You and the staff have built strong relationships with parents. Your provision of good-quality family learning sessions, early-bird reading sessions, progress review meetings every half term and formal parent evenings twice a year ensures that parents and carers have every opportunity to be involved in their children's learning. Therefore, pupils are happy, confident learners.

As a small school, you have efficiently used the skills across the Gateshead Catholic Primary Partnership while developing a skills-based curriculum. You then extended this through involvement in the wider community alongside visits further afield, for example the locally-based Thought Foundation Arts project or the community-led initiative of cycling to work, as well as trips to an outdoor local heritage museum and the beach.

Your support for pupils' physical and mental health is strong. Through after-school sports clubs, weekly swimming and the brain gym, pupils are active every day.

Through work with Encompass, an organisation to support families suffering from domestic violence, you positively promote healthy relationships. When children are finding things difficult emotionally, they can choose a member of staff whom they have particularly close relations with as their mentor. The member of staff then ensures they check in with the pupil every day to give them support if necessary.

Governance is a strength. Governors know the school well because they regularly visit. They regularly observe what is happening in the classrooms and talk with staff and pupils. They receive detailed reports from the headteacher and other leaders on the progress of pupils. They use all this information to ask the headteacher searching questions to ensure the school's continued improvement.

Pupils' behaviour is exemplary. The positive reward systems in class and weekly celebration assembly for positive behaviour reinforce well the high expectations you hold. You listen to pupils' views. For example, through the Teeny Mini-Vinnies discussion group, pupils bring forward any issues and suggestions they have, such as the rules for behaviour in the playground. Lunchtime staff are effectively supported with behaviour management. By putting calmer activities in place in the playground, the potential for any low-level conflict has been dramatically reduced. Pupils conduct themselves well throughout the day. They are taught from Reception how to listen to each other's views. They willingly accept criticism and reflect on how they can improve their work. Pupils understand about the different forms that bullying can take and the school pre-empts any issues through effective assemblies on valuing differences. Pupils respond well to instructions and requests from staff. During the inspection, there were no incidents of low-level disruption. Pupils were consistently engaged in learning.

Looking at the work pupils have completed demonstrates that, in most classes, progress is strong for pupils of all abilities. Where this is not the case, there is a mismatch between pupils' knowledge and skills and the activities they are being given.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. All staff are aware of their responsibilities and are proactive in reporting any concerns. You then closely monitor these and swiftly refer to specialist services to ensure pupils are protected. You make sure that any paperwork is passed on to the next school at transition so that pupils' safety is secured.

As they start work in school, everyone, including non-teaching staff, learns about their role within safeguarding. All training for governors and staff is regularly updated through local authority training, as well as through an external consultant.

You make certain that the caretaker regularly completes risk assessments of the site. He also monitors the entry gates and reports any concerns to you. Effective procedures are in place to ensure that children are collected by known adults or their representatives.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, I looked particularly at the teaching and application of phonics. You and other leaders have a sharp focus on the teaching of early reading. All teaching staff understand its importance and all pupils make strong progress from their differing starting points. We saw the most able children in the Reception class using their phonics skills to read instructions from the whiteboard. Teachers then practised known sounds and introduced effectively different ways of spelling these. The children quickly learned this and used it in their writing. By Year 2, pupils are being challenged to demonstrate their understanding of how to add '-ing' to a given word and then explain why they might double a consonant or drop an '-e'. Support staff are well briefed to support pupils who need additional support to bring their understanding up to the same level as their peers. Generally, pupils apply these skills and knowledge to access the wider curriculum. Where this is less successful is where reading materials and learning resources do not consistently match pupils' phonics skills.
- I reflected on how you foster high expectations for staff and pupils. In most classes, teachers and support staff have high expectations of the learning that the pupils need to make. In mathematics, pupils are questioned on their thinking and explanations. For example, in a lesson seen during the inspection, Year 1 pupils were challenged to explain and demonstrate how many ways they could divide a given number equally. They then had the additional problem given of experimenting with an odd number. In Year 2, while the most able pupils work independently using different techniques to solve problems, those pupils who need more concrete approaches work with the skilled teacher to increase their understanding. In literacy, teachers extend pupils' vocabulary for story writing. In Year 2, pupils are expected to read with each other and independently answer more complex comprehension questions. Pupils' handwriting in Year 2 is of a high standard as pupils begin to join up their letter writing. In Reception, children demonstrate excellent speaking and listening skills when discussing their work, while others look, listen and suggest improvements. Teachers skilfully intervene to focus on literacy and mathematics in this improvement. For example, during the inspection a teacher was overheard suggesting that a model of a railway station could have signage for entrances and that platforms could be numbered. When we looked in pupils' books, we saw that in most of the classes strong progress is made by pupils of all abilities. However, this is not consistent in all year groups. You have put in additional support to improve the quality of teaching and learning where this weakness has been identified. This has had some positive effect over time; however, this has been too slow. You have now acted to address this.
- I considered how you foster the sharing of best practice across the school. This has included developing skills in observing and planning through modelling and working alongside staff using the strongest teachers. You have widened this support by arranging opportunities to observe effective teaching in other schools across the wider partnership of Catholic schools. Any issues that are identified from this are swiftly followed up and training offered to support improvements. You set stretching targets for all staff, which are closely monitored through

observations and the effect on outcomes for pupils.

- I explored how effectively you support children and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Adaptations are made to ensure that all pupils can access the curriculum. Pupils with SEND make strong progress from their differing starting points. Although staff know the needs of each child, we agreed that this could be enhanced with additional training prior to these pupils starting school so that no time is lost in supporting their learning. Parents who made their views known stated how helpful the school is in supporting them to secure support for their children. You have a detailed accessibility plan in place and have made some adaptations, such as a wider entrance door and an accessible toilet. Plans are developed with parents to ensure there is home–school continuity in routines and approaches. Staff ensure that there are ways of recording other than writing so that all pupils can demonstrate their progress. The school works effectively with several partner agencies, such as a consultant paediatrician and educational psychologists, to ensure that pupils with SEND make good progress across their school career.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- activities and resources used during teaching consistently match the phonics knowledge and skills of the pupils to enable them to access the wider curriculum and so progress even more strongly
- before children with SEND start school, staff access additional training to enhance their knowledge of individual pupils' needs.

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

Yours sincerely

Geoffrey Dorrity
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

The focus of the inspection was to affirm the standards identified at the previous inspection and to find out how well pupils and the school are progressing. I held a variety of meetings with you and your staff. We observed six sessions across all age groups.

I considered a range of evidence, including the school improvement plan, leaders' self-evaluation of the school's effectiveness and other documentation. I met with four members of the governing body and spoke with representatives of the local authority and the diocese. I considered the nine responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, spoke with a parent and took account of a written submission from a different parent. I reviewed the six responses to Ofsted's online staff questionnaire.