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Mrs Julia Ashton
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ashton

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary Blackbrook

Following my visit to the school on 4 October 2017, 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 January 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since that point, you have overseen building and renovation work. The premises are bright and inviting and staff and pupils alike take pride in the school's appearance.

You make it your mission as headteacher to provide the best all-round education possible for your pupils. It is clear that you provide well for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and you promote fundamental British values effectively. In a conversation I had with some Year 6 pupils, they demonstrated that they understand concepts such as democracy and the rule of law. You provide a good range of opportunities to help pupils develop as fully as they can. They attend sports clubs, such as judo, archery and gymnastics, and clubs that develop other interests, like music and science. You also plan activities to increase pupils' understanding of other faiths and cultures. These include lessons in, for example, religious education and educational visits to places of worship, such as synagogues.

Your actions to address the areas for improvement that inspectors identified at the last inspection have been effective. The school now has a new approach to providing feedback to pupils that allows time for them to think and respond and explains the next steps in their learning well.

You now provide regular opportunities for teachers to share and observe strong practice in other schools in the area. You have also introduced 'masterclasses', which involve leaders in school demonstrating aspects of effective teaching to members of staff every week.

You have also improved the opportunities for pupils to use their writing skills in subjects other than English. For example, pupils in key stage 1 write newspaper articles about the Great Fire of London, attempting a sophisticated style and structure with sentences such as, 'The beastly fire destroyed the lovely city of London.'

All of the above actions have been effective, as current pupils make good progress from their starting points and the school continues to provide a good standard of education.

Your plans for school improvement are thorough and well focused. Following a dip in achievement by the end of Year 6 in 2017, you have been prompt to devise strategies to secure improvement next year. I will refer to these strategies in more detail later in this letter. You have precise and measurable success criteria for your actions to improve mathematics and English, which form your main focus. However, you recognise that the school's improvement plans would benefit from similarly precise statements about the intended impact of your actions for subjects other than English and mathematics.

You receive effective support through advisers from the local authority and from the archdiocese. Both advisers have recognised the recent dip in achievement in Year 6 but are confident that you have suitable plans to tackle it.

In my conversation with pupils from Year 6, they told me that they like school, with one pupil saying that teachers 'make you want to work'. They said that pupils work well in class and they lose hardly any learning time because of misbehaviour. The pupils I spoke with were polite and articulate.

I also spoke with a large group of staff other than senior leaders. They were highly positive about the school, saying that particular strengths are the care that pupils receive and the links you make with families through, for example, the work of the school's learning mentor. They also appreciate the training that leaders provide to ensure that staff have the knowledge and skills to deliver the school's plans for improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. You have a thorough process for reporting concerns and you rigorously follow up issues with external agencies as necessary. The school's record of checks on members of staff meets requirements.

The culture of safeguarding in the school is strong. You provide regular training to staff and governors: they are knowledgeable about the correct safeguarding procedures and how to recognise various signs of abuse. You have also identified that neglect is of particular concern in your area and you provide extra training to ensure that staff are alert to the signs. Pupils feel safe in school and know that adults will help them if they have any worries. They know about different types of bullying, including racist and homophobic. They told me that incidents of bullying are very rare, but that teachers would manage them effectively if they did occur. They also said that staff give them the knowledge they need to stay safe online.

Inspection findings

- I followed certain key lines of enquiry during the inspection, which we agreed at the start of my visit. I have already written about some of these earlier in this letter. They related to how well you have addressed the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection and whether safeguarding is effective.
- Another key line of enquiry concerned the progress of children in the early years, especially boys and those who are disadvantaged. You analysed assessment information for 2016 and recognised that new strategies were needed to secure improvement for these groups. You devised approaches such as providing boys with more non-fiction texts to follow their interests and more outdoor experiences. You have included more activities that involve solving various problems, for instance following a trip to the zoo. You also provided disadvantaged children with extra activities, based on nursery rhymes and stories, to stimulate better communication skills. These actions have been effective in improving achievement for these groups and, overall, nearly two thirds of children in Reception achieved a good level of development in 2017, representing good progress from their starting points. However, you recognise that the difference in achievement between disadvantaged children and others nationally needs to reduce even quicker. You have already put actions in place to address this issue, such as new one-to-one teaching sessions to support their development in phonics.
- I also focused on the progress of pupils in key stage 1 in English and mathematics. Evidence from books and from the school's own assessment information shows that current pupils make good progress. Because of improved teaching, including a greater focus on mastery in mathematics, pupils' achievement at the end of Year 2 in 2017 improved in reading, writing and mathematics compared with 2016. The achievement of disadvantaged pupils in 2017 also improved in writing and mathematics, but was broadly similar in reading. You have already taken steps to secure further improvement by introducing, for example, a more focused approach to guided reading sessions.
- Another key line of enquiry related to progress in English and mathematics among pupils currently in key stage 2. There were examples of good achievement in unvalidated assessment information for 2017. For example, the percentage of pupils who achieved the expected standard in writing was above the national average and disadvantaged pupils showed improved achievement compared with 2016.

- The same assessment information, however, shows that the respective proportions of pupils in Year 6 achieving the expected standard in reading and in mathematics were below the national averages. You have quickly responded to this dip in performance by putting new strategies in place to secure improvement. For example, in reading, teachers focus more closely on developing key reading skills, such as retrieving information accurately and correctly inferring meaning from various types of text. Evidence from books and the school's own assessment information shows that current pupils in key stage 2 made strong progress last year and have made a good start this year. You acknowledge, however, that you need to continue to secure good progress and ensure that the current Year 6 pupils achieve well by the end of the year.
- Finally, governors carry out their duties effectively. They provide robust challenge to you and hold senior leaders to account strongly. They have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they accelerate the progress of pupils in key stage 2 and achieve improved results at the end of Year 6
- they continue to reduce the difference in achievement between disadvantaged children in the early years and children nationally who are not disadvantaged
- in their plans for improvement, leaders of subjects other than English and mathematics devise more precise success criteria that relate to pupils' achievement.

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 St Helens. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mark Quinn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

With you, I carried out short visits to the early years and all year groups in key stage 1 and key stage 2. I scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation summary, action plans for school improvement, records of incidents of bullying and misbehaviour, minutes of meetings of the governing body and records connected with the safeguarding of children. I held discussions with members of staff, governors and pupils. I had a discussion with a representative of the local authority and a representative of the archdiocese. I analysed pupils' work

and the school's own assessment information. I evaluated 46 responses received through Parent View, Ofsted's online survey. I also analysed 31 responses to the staff questionnaire and one response to the pupil questionnaire.