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Mrs Rachel Williams
Headteacher
St Joseph's RC Primary School
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Dear Mrs Williams

Short inspection of St Joseph's RC Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 28 November 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 March 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You wasted no time in getting to know your staff and the wider community, following your appointment as headteacher in September 2015. Very early into your headship, you found yourself managing significant levels of staff absence at deputy headteacher and senior teacher level. Despite two rounds of recruitment, you remain without a substantive senior leadership team. Such is your drive and professionalism that you are undeterred. Instead, you managed a very difficult period in the school's history with great sensitivity, professionalism and stoicism. You have single handedly improved the work of the school and established your very high expectations to all aspects of school life. At the same time, you have created a cohesive team of staff who are supportive of one another and who share your resilience and ambition.

Although working without substantive senior leaders has been difficult and has increased your workload considerably, it has also enabled you to focus upon developing your middle leadership team successfully. You have provided extensive training and support to enable them to embrace their roles and develop their skills effectively. This was an area for improvement at the last inspection.

Your strong vision and highest of expectations permeate all aspects of school life. It is your intention that all pupils will be successful and you ensure that they receive guidance and nurturing to be caring individuals, who will fulfil their role as exemplary citizens in the world. Governors endorse your vision and bring a wide range of skills to their roles. They are keen to use them to challenge you. Local authority officers conducted a review of their skills and the governors' subsequent action plan is supporting their development further.

You have an accurate evaluation of the school's work and this enables you to quickly secure improvement when you identify a need. You then systematically unpick the issues and offer timely advice and support. Your development plans identify the correct priorities for improvement, but you accept that they would benefit from greater links to the intended outcomes for key groups of pupils and attainment at the higher levels.

One of the areas for improvement from the previous inspection was to improve pupils' outcomes in mathematics, which at the time were below national averages. You introduced an approach to the teaching of mathematics that ensures that pupils develop well the skills of arithmetic fluency, reasoning and problem-solving. Practice sessions at the start of each day and detailed planning tools for teachers have secured year-on-year improvement in pupils' outcomes at both key stages 1 and 2. In 2017, pupils' progress in mathematics was above average and in the top 20% of all schools nationally.

Almost half of the children starting school arrive with skills that are lower than those typical for children their age, especially in the area of learning associated with communication and language. This is in part due to the growing proportions of children that enter school who are in the earliest stages of speaking English. They quickly settle because of the very strong bonds that are established. This continues throughout the school.

Pupils in all years know that they are cared for and that there is always someone to look after them. Their personal development is given high priority and manifests itself in the exemplary behaviours seen in and around school. Pupils are welcoming to visitors, demonstrate good manners and are very keen to share their work and talk about their learning. These highly positive attitudes are testimony to the dedication of staff and conducive to the good outcomes evident.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors place a high priority on all aspects of safeguarding and have ensured that arrangements are fit for purpose. You make rigorous checks on the suitability of all staff and volunteers to work with children. You promote a strong culture of vigilance and early response to identified issues. You have well-established relationships with a range of professionals who are helping the school to keep pupils safe.

Staff and governors receive regular training to ensure that they are up to date with the most recent and relevant legislation. All staff understand the responsibility they have in keeping children safe. You have recently appointed a dedicated inclusion worker, who has made an immediate impact on strengthening bonds between home and school. She ensures that some of the most vulnerable pupils receive appropriate care and support in a timely manner.

Pupils have a good understanding of how to keep themselves safe and a good understanding of what bullying is in all of its forms. From an early age, pupils know the importance of telling an adult when someone has been unkind. All adults treat pupils with respect and deal with any issues raised sensitively and in an ageappropriate way. As such, the school has very few low-level behavioural incidents to deal with.

Inspection findings

- One of my focuses for the inspection was to check the school's approach to the teaching of phonics. Historically, pupils' outcomes in the national Year 1 screening check have been variable. We found that all staff followed a consistent approach of listening to sounds, reading sounds and writing sounds and that pupils could apply their phonic skills independently. However, the sessions we observed lacked the required pace to enable pupils to acquire and apply skills quickly. This meant that some pupils were not learning new sounds as rapidly as they could and this slowed their progress. This was not the case in Year 2 where catch-up phonics is highly effective in ensuring that almost all pupils reach the expected standard.
- I also wanted to check the actions leaders were taking to ensure that pupils achieve highly in writing. Although pupils' progress in writing is good over time, very few pupils have reached the high standard, particularly disadvantaged pupils. You have introduced an approach to writing that uses quality texts to provide a stimulus for writing. For example, Year 6 pupils were using their study of 'Room 13' to support their character descriptions. Pupils were engrossed in the story and had lots they wanted to write about. This is paying dividends and pupils have many ideas for their writing. Work seen in pupils' books shows that pupils are developing their writing skills effectively and making good progress from their starting points. However, the most able pupils are not challenged sufficiently to use more sophisticated techniques that will enable them to achieve consistently at the higher standard. This is one of your priorities for improvement.
- I also wanted to check the early years' provision in developing children's early literacy skills, particularly for boys. While adult-led sessions encouraged children to write simple words successfully, there were too few opportunities in freechoice activities for children to extend their early reading and writing skills. This was the same for both indoor and outside play. You agreed with me that this was an area for further improvement.

- Another focus for the inspection was to review leaders' actions in monitoring and improving attendance. From September 2017, you have appointed a dedicated 'attendance and inclusion' officer to support you in improving attendance and punctuality. Together, you monitor pupils' absence diligently and carefully and have a raft of incentives to encourage good attendance. Although there was a slight dip to overall absence last year, there was a marked improvement in the proportion of pupils who struggle to attend school regularly. Holidays taken in term time remain the biggest barrier to securing reduced absence. It impacts negatively on overall attendance by over 3% points.
- My final focus was to review the impact of additional spending for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and who qualify for the pupil premium grant. Over time, pupils' attainment from both groups has been variable at the expected and higher standard. In September, you appointed a new special educational needs coordinator who has transformed procedures in the school. Systems are in place to identify pupils' needs and to monitor their progress in a timely manner. She has established effective links with external agencies, which are providing support and advice to inform additional interventions. A detailed skills audit of all adults delivering interventions was completed to ensure their effective deployment in lessons. Early signs show that this is enabling accelerated progress for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities.
- There are too few disadvantaged pupils within the school to form any meaningful comparison with national averages. I found that they make equally good progress as their peers. When this is occasionally not the case, it is because they have additional and complex needs.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- action plans are linked precisely to gains in pupils' outcomes, including that of key groups, at the expected and higher standard, so they can be evaluated accurately
- most-able pupils are challenged to extend their writing skills by applying and improving more sophisticated techniques so they can reach the higher standards consistently
- adults in the early years increase the opportunities to extend children's early literacy skills in free-choice activities both inside and outdoors.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Buckle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you to discuss the impact of the actions you are taking to improve the school and to discuss safeguarding arrangements. We observed learning together in all classes and we talked to pupils about their learning and reviewed their work in books. I also held meetings with the chair of the governing body and the local authority's school improvement adviser. I talked informally to pupils in classes and around school. I also talked formally with eight pupils and listened to them read. I reviewed the provisional summer 2017 results in national assessment tests of pupils at the end of key stage 2. I also checked the assessment information of all other year groups, and groups of pupils for the last academic year. Account was taken of the seven responses from the Ofsted staff survey and 11 responses to the pupils' survey. Parents spoke to the inspector at the end of the school day and their views were taken into account. There were too few responses to Ofsted's parent questionnaire, Parent View, to take these views into account. A number of documents were scrutinised. These included a range of safeguarding documents, the school's written evaluation of its work and the school improvement plan. I also reviewed minutes from recent full governing body meetings and subcommittee meetings.