

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs Lynne Williamson
Headteacher
St Thomas' Church of England (Aided) Primary School
Poplar Drive
Kidsgrove
Stoke-on-Trent
ST7 4HT

Dear Mrs Williamson

Short inspection of St Thomas' Church of England (Aided) Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 26 January 2016, 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 July 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

You and your governing body provide strong and effective leadership. Since the last inspection in 2011 you have managed many staff changes well and minimised disruption to pupils' learning. Pupils thrive in a very positive climate for learning, as one pupil explained, 'I love coming to school, it is friendly and everyone is really helpful and trusting.' Other pupils in the group agreed. This level of satisfaction is also affirmed by the vast majority of parents that spoke to me at the start of the inspection and those that responded on Parent View. Pupils thoroughly enjoy school and wear their smart school uniform with pride. I saw how happy pupils were as they arrived at school in the morning, greeting their friends and ready for the challenges ahead. The pupils attending the morning breakfast club form very positive relationships. You and your staff team foster very well the Christian values that lie at the heart of this Church of England school. In addition, staff and governors are successful in teaching and promoting core British values of democracy, respect and tolerance of all world faiths, customs and traditions.

You and your staff value pupils' work and contributions and are ambitious for every pupil to succeed. This is best demonstrated by the high quality and varied displays of pupils' academic and creative work in classrooms and corridors throughout the school. The staff are very committed to the school's values which successfully

nurture pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development alongside their academic and personal development. You, your staff and governors have created a truly inclusive school that provides high quality support and interventions for disabled pupils, those with additional needs, or special educational needs.

You, your deputy headteacher and staff with management responsibilities skilfully monitor and support colleagues to make sure that pupils receive consistently good teaching. In addition, there is some outstanding practice enabling pupils to achieve high standards in reading and writing, as seen in Year 6 for example, where pupils are currently reading and rehearsing a scene from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The pupils were observed reading, reciting and writing extracts from the play in preparation for a collaborative performance with other schools later this term. Reception children continue to receive high-quality provision and it is to your credit and that of your early years staff that this quality has been maintained since the last inspection.

You and your staff plan a creative and varied curriculum that interests and enlivens pupils. The last time the school was inspected, it was noted that information technology (IT) was not being used enough in mathematics. You have successfully addressed this as pupils are using computers and other devices very well to support their learning. Standards are improving well in reading, writing and mathematics. In mathematics, last year's national test results for Year 6 pupils showed that some pupils, particularly boys, did not make as much progress as expected. You and your staff have rightly identified the reasons for this and have put in place effective action plans to accelerate pupils' progress in mathematics. Current assessment information shows that standards are recovering well in mathematics compared to last year's results, although there still needs to be a continued focus on improving pupils' problem-solving skills.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team and governors have made sure that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and robust. Staff vetting procedures are rigorous and up to date and include robust checks on visitors, volunteers and supply staff. You and your governors keep up to date with safeguarding training and ensure that policies are updated and reviewed. The indoor and outdoor areas, including the excellent resources and areas available for early years children, are clean, safe and secure. The single central record of disclosure and barring reports is up to date and meets legal requirements.

Inspection findings

- You successfully lead by example and promote a very positive, supportive and cohesive school culture. Pupils behave well and enjoy school and this is reflected in high attendance rates. Pupils are courteous, mature and very proud of their school and community. Strong spiritual, moral, social and cultural development

underpins the work of the school. Relationships between staff and pupils and among pupils are strong.

- You and your deputy headteacher provide very good support and offer expert guidance to other staff. This is a significant and notable strength of your leadership as it nurtures and fosters good and outstanding teaching across the school. Even where teaching falls short of your expectations, you are quick to intervene and provide the right support and guidance that improves classroom practice. Professional development, training and regular monitoring of lessons and pupils' work are well planned and offer staff clear pointers for improvement. There are effective and developing links with other schools, including a teaching school, offering staff opportunities to see and share best practice.
- Strong foundations are laid in the early years, enabling Reception children to thrive and flourish. Indoor and outdoor areas and resources are of high quality and support stimulating and exciting learning experience for the children. We observed Reception children enjoying a range of activities, including using the interactive white board to calculate and estimate number problems; using binoculars to explore outside with the children excitedly commenting to us that they could see 'far away'; or identifying different winter birds, such as the robin redbreast, and happily recording this on a chart as part of their science work. I explored more outdoor areas and found them to be safe and secure as well as exciting and 'mysterious' as one child reminded me, 'You're going up the secret bank!' The child watched and guided me as I opened a small gate to explore through the willowed arch up an incline to an exciting and well-resourced grassed area. I can clearly see why the children love to explore and use their imagination as they role play, observe, chat and happily engage to develop and improve the language and communication skills through the many and varied activities provided by an expert staff team.
- These strong foundations in the early years are built on successfully in Years 1 and 2. Test results show that the teaching of phonics (letters and their sounds) is very effective. As a result, the large majority of pupils make rapid progress with their reading, writing and spelling. Pupils benefit from the many opportunities they have to read in school and at home. By the time pupils start Year 3, the large majority of pupils reach or exceed age-related levels in reading and writing.
- Achievement gaps are closing between significant groups, such as those that previously existed between disadvantaged pupils and others in the school and nationally in Key Stage 1. Last year's national test results for Key Stage 2 pupils also showed that disadvantaged pupils did as well as other pupils in the school and nationally. Pupils read widely and often and reach well above average standards in reading by the end of Year 6. Pupils write independently and often with increasing confidence and skill as they move up the school. Individual learning targets help to focus pupils on the next steps they need to take to

improve their work. Two pupils confirmed this to me when stating, 'Our teacher encourages us to write neatly and accurately and checks spellings. These targets (pointing these out to me in their books) really help us to improve our writing.'

- Pupils achieve well in mathematics and science. We observed a highly effective science lesson in the hall, led by your deputy headteacher. We were very impressed by the range and quality of science work covered and when we returned at the end of the lesson pupils showed us how much they had learned from their results after testing the effects of friction on toy vehicles. In mathematics, workbooks show that pupils make good progress, but in some books the pupils do too many number activities to consolidate their knowledge of number facts before moving on to harder work. There are some good examples in workbooks where teachers' marking encourages pupils to try something harder in order to test if the pupils are ready for more challenging problem-solving tasks. Nonetheless, pupils are not always provided with tasks that require them to think logically in order to unlock or solve a puzzle or problem. This slows learning in mathematics and pupils are too reliant on guidance or the use of trial and error rather than learning how to apply more logical thinking to sequence each step of a problem or puzzle.
- Across the school, teachers and support staff are successful in encouraging pupils to learn well and try hard. Pupils thrive in this very positive climate for learning. Classrooms are adorned with many high-quality displays of pupils' writing, posters, paintings and drawings, reflecting how well staff value pupils' work and contributions. Combined with an outstanding and creative curriculum, the teaching and support provided for pupils successfully promote and improve their academic and personal development.
- Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs do very well and are extremely well supported. The provision for these pupils, as well as those identified by leaders as needing to do better or catch up, is a real strength of the school's inclusive provision. Pupils with education, health and care plans and statements of special educational needs, achieve very well and thrive in this school. The parents who spoke with me or wrote to me confirmed that the attention and care that these pupils receive is of enormous benefit to the pupils and their families. An additional teacher is very well deployed to support pupils identified as needing to catch up in Key Stage 1 and Years 3 and 4. This intervention is timely and very effective.
- Your staff regularly check how well pupils are doing using accessible and accurate assessment information about pupils' learning and progress. You have made sure that staff use the new National Curriculum assessment without levels as a means of gauging how much progress pupils make. It is to your credit that you and your team are constantly refining assessments to test whether they provide an accurate account of pupils' work and progress. Routine book scans and lesson visits are used intelligently to check pupils' achievement.

- Pupils are offered wide-ranging and extensive opportunities to experience and excel in music and the creative and performing arts, as well as in sport and outdoor pursuits. Pupils learn about the diversity of cultures and customs that exist in modern Britain today. They are taught British values of tolerance and respect for all faiths, customs and religions. The very close links with St Thomas' Church enhances the school's core values and Christian character as a voluntary aided Church of England primary school.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- there is a continued focus on raising standards and improving pupils' progress in mathematics; making sure that teachers plan more problem-solving tasks in mathematics lessons that enable pupils to apply logical thinking
- the most-able pupils demonstrate a mastery of number, shape and space by undertaking more tasks that deepen their understanding of mathematical concepts to help them reach high standards.

Yours sincerely

Charalambos Loizou
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

In addition to meeting with you, your deputy headteacher and some senior staff and four governors, including the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body, you and I visited all classrooms and the early years. I spoke to a number of parents at the start of the school day to seek their views about the school. I spoke to a number of pupils during lessons and looked at their work in books. I also met a group of pupils from Key Stage 2 to discuss their work, progress and views. I contacted, by telephone, one of the local authority's commissioning managers for school improvement to discuss her most recent evaluation of the school's effectiveness and leadership. I also considered the views of 53 parents and carers recorded on Parent View, the online Ofsted questionnaire. I looked at assessment information and the targets set for this year's cohorts of pupils in each class. I scrutinised and discussed the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan, and checked staff vetting procedures to determine whether the school's arrangements for safeguarding are effective.