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Nicola Rielly
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Dear Nicola Rielly

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 17 May 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 November 2010.

This school continues to be good.

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

You, senior leaders and governors have high aspirations for pupils. At the heart of the work of the school is an ethos of strong teamwork. Staff say that they are valued and that morale throughout the school is high. As a consequence, everyone is working towards the same aspirational goals.

Pupils say that their school is a happy place. Respect and tolerance run as a golden thread in every classroom. Pupils are proud of their school and of their own achievements. They eagerly share their work and confidently explain what aspects of it they are most pleased with. Teachers are held in high regard. Pupils talk with enthusiasm about how their teachers make learning fun. In one class, for example, pupils delighted in telling the inspector how their teacher had demonstrated the law of gravity by jumping off her desk!

The areas identified as in need of improvement at the previous Ofsted inspection have been successfully addressed. An effective leadership structure is in place and roles are now clearly defined. Leadership responsibilities span across both schools in the federation, giving opportunities to share expertise and develop skills. The school places a high priority on staff training and professional development. Leaders have

good opportunities to enhance their skills through the collaborative work of the 'Small Schools Partnership'.

Providing more opportunities for learning outdoors in the early years, also identified as an area in need of improvement at the previous inspection, has been addressed. The outdoor learning environment is bright and purposeful. Activities are well planned to meet the needs of the children and as a consequence they sustain their interest and concentration well. Several children, for example, developed their communication and language skills as they imaginatively acted out roles as superheroes.

Safeguarding is effective.

Every pupil who spoke to the inspector stated that they felt the school is a safe place. Senior leaders and governors have created an ethos where everyone knows that keeping children safe is of the highest priority. Relevant policies and procedures are up to date and understood by everyone. All staff have had the appropriate training to ensure that they are able to recognise the signs if a pupil is at risk of harm. Checks to ensure that adults are suitable to work with children have been diligently undertaken and are recorded accurately in the single central record.

Inspection findings

- The headteacher, senior leaders and governors are unwavering in delivering continual improvements across the school. Staff at all levels feel valued. Targeted investment in good-quality professional development ensures that improvements in the quality of teaching are sustained.
- The headteacher sets a clear and ambitious vision. Expectations are high and everyone knows their role. Senior leaders use lesson observations, checks on pupils' work and pupil progress meetings to hold teachers to account and ensure that the quality of teaching continues to improve.
- Senior leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of their subjects well. They take decisive action to address any areas that are identified as needing to improve. A greater focus on writing and applying spelling, punctuation and grammar skills across a wide range of subjects, for example, has helped to ensure that the progress pupils make in writing has remained significantly above the national average for the past three years.
- The headteacher makes very effective use of the networking opportunities available as part of a federation of two schools and as part of a 'Small Schools Partnership' with six other local schools. Leaders, teachers and teaching assistants visit other schools to develop their own practice as well as share expertise. This aspect of professional development contributes to continued improvements in the quality of teaching and leadership.
- The leader of the provision for pupils with special educational needs has had a very positive impact since her relatively recent appointment. The introduction of an individual pupil tracking format, for instance, is supporting teaching assistants to precisely check how well pupils are making progress against their

targets in every lesson. This group of pupils makes progress that is at least in line with other pupils within the school.

- Governors share senior leaders' aspirations for the pupils of the school. They know the strengths and weaknesses of the school well. They are well informed about the actions leaders are taking to address any identified areas in need of improvement. However, governors do not ask enough challenging questions of leaders to fully hold them to account for the impact of those actions. As a consequence, governors are not fully able to assess how effective their use of resources has been in improving outcomes for pupils.
- The teaching of writing is a significant strength of the school. Pupils are inspired to write through the study of high-quality reading texts. Pupils are proud of their work and are able to confidently explain why. One pupil, for instance, explained that she was delighted with her writing because she had 'intrigued the reader'. The skills of spelling, punctuation and grammar are very well applied to writing across a range of subjects. In most classes the standard of handwriting is excellent. As a consequence, pupils of all abilities, including the most able, make strong progress.
- The quality of teaching and learning in mathematics is not as consistently strong across the school. In upper key stage 2, work is very well planned to meet the needs of pupils and provides a high level of challenge to pupils of all abilities, especially the most able. As a consequence, pupils in Year 5 and Year 6 make substantial and sustained progress. While pupils elsewhere in the school make the progress expected of them in mathematics, they do not always make the rapid gains that they are capable of. This is because pupils are sometimes not given work that sufficiently challenges them and deepens their understanding at an early enough point in their lessons.
- Following a fall from the very high standards that pupils have historically reached in reading in 2015, leaders have been successful in addressing the issue. A love of reading now permeates every corner of the school. New books have been purchased for each class and dedicated and enticing reading areas are evident in each classroom. Pupils now talk enthusiastically about the books that they read. As a result, data provided by the school shows that pupils are now making sustained progress in all classes across the school.
- Teaching assistants make a valuable contribution to pupils' learning. Their strong subject knowledge enables them to support and challenge pupils, of all abilities, in equal measure.
- The teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) is also a strength of the school. Teachers display strong subject knowledge and have high expectations of what pupils can achieve. As a consequence, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the phonics screening check has improved for the past two years to be significantly above the national average in 2015.
- Children in the early years are very well prepared to meet the demands of the Year 1 curriculum, as they move into key stage 1. This is because good-quality teaching and leadership ensures that the classroom environment and learning activities match the needs of children well, building upon their interests and enthusing them to learn. Children developed their fine motor skills well, for

instance, as they eagerly designed and made a new castle for the queen (to celebrate her birthday).

- Pupils are well behaved. They listen attentively to their teachers and treat their peers with respect. Pupils say that playtimes are calm and that everyone gets along. When pupils do fall out they state that they are mainly able to resolve their own differences.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- governors ask the questions necessary to judge the impact of leaders' actions on improving outcomes for pupils
- the quality of the teaching of mathematics is consistently excellent in all classes, so that all pupils make the progress that they are capable of.

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

Yours sincerely

Martin Bell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I held meetings with:

- you and senior leaders
- two groups of pupils
- five members of the governing body
- a small group of teaching assistants
- the person responsible for maintaining safeguarding records
- a representative of the local authority
- the school improvement partner.

I scrutinised a range of documents including safeguarding checks and minutes of meetings. I also visited a number of classrooms with you to speak to pupils, look at their books and observe their learning. I took account of the 49 responses to the online questionnaire (Parent View) as well as responses to the school's own recent parent questionnaire. I also took account of the 12 responses to the Ofsted staff questionnaire.