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Mrs Elizabeth Mouchel
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Mouchel

Short inspection of St Helen's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 20 September 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 October 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school. In the previous inspection, you were praised for establishing a safe and caring school in which pupils behave well and enjoy their learning. St Helen's Catholic Primary School continues to develop its nurturing ethos in which pupils are proud of their school and most have positive attitudes to their learning. Based on clear and agreed school values around the word 'respect', you and your leadership team ensure that the school continues to be a place where pupils' personal development is given a high priority.

You and governors have developed the school's capacity for improvement by strengthening the senior leadership team. You are determined that, even though you are now expanding to a two-form entry school, you maintain this strong ethos. In the building of the new classrooms, to cater for the additional pupils, you have carefully provided suitable spaces where pupils can learn and enjoy being with one another. The pupils told me how much they appreciate the new library facilities and the books they can choose for personal reading. The parents who expressed their views by free text on the online Parent View questionnaire agree that the community ethos of the school is being maintained.

Pupils enjoy the many activities provided for them in lessons and during less structured times, such as lunchtimes. They wear their uniform with pride and are unfailingly polite. Attendance continues to be above the national average. You

reward those who have 100% attendance with a gold badge, which pupils consider is a worthy prize.

There have been several changes in the school's leadership since the previous inspection. Last academic year, you restructured your senior team to now include two assistant headteachers. This restructuring is proving successful and adding further to your capacity for improvement. You and your leaders have a secure understanding of the progress that pupils make, and work closely with teachers to improve and develop consistency across the school.

Governance has continued to improve since the previous inspection. The governing body has reconstituted and used this opportunity to review how they operate. Consequently, the governing body now possesses the necessary skills and expertise to hold school leaders to account.

You and your governors are ambitious for the school and the impact that you make on pupils' achievement. Together, you are accurate and honest in your evaluation of the school's strengths and areas for improvements. You work well with other schools to moderate the accuracy of your assessment information and to review your own practices, so that you can continue to raise the achievement of pupils.

A test of strong leadership is how you respond to challenges. You were all disappointed with the key stage 2 results this year, especially for the most able pupils. This is the first time that results have been below national averages for many years. You have wasted no time in reviewing the reasons, adapting the curriculum for pupils and beginning this academic year with renewed energy and plans to accelerate the progress that pupils make in all classes. Your middle leaders for English and mathematics are fully involved in monitoring the quality of pupils' work. As a result, leaders at all levels are quickly ensuring that pupils are able to achieve their very best. You are using clear, proven strategies to provide the necessary support to staff so that the high quality of teaching is consistent across the curriculum.

Children in the early years start their school life well with each child receiving personal attention and care. Consequently, children settle quickly and well. The adults provide stimulating activities that enthuse and encourage children to develop good learning habits. For example, the outside area is well equipped with a good range of activities for children to explore and practise their physical skills. Consequently, the proportion of pupils who leave Reception having achieved a good level of development has been at least at the national average over the last few years. Although at an early stage, you have firm plans to ensure that these children develop their early writing skills swiftly.

Safeguarding is effective.

The school's safeguarding policies and procedures meet current requirements. Recording systems are fully in place for the recruitment of staff. Leaders and governors are rigorous in ensuring that the necessary recruitment checks have been

carried out effectively. Documents and school records are meticulously kept. The school website contains the required statutory information.

Leaders and governors ensure that staff are well trained and informed about new guidance, including the 'Prevent' duty aimed at raising awareness of the dangers of radicalisation. Staff receive regular training so they are confident to implement the school's policies. Staff told me about the good-quality induction training that was given when they started. They consider that there is a strong culture within the school of keeping pupils safe.

Pupils spoken to during the inspection say they feel safe and have someone to talk to if they are concerned. Nearly all parents who responded to Parent View agree that their children are safe. Pupils are confident that the adults at school will deal well with conflict or potential bullying situations, should they arise.

Inspection findings

- At the previous inspection, you were asked to improve the feedback teachers give to pupils. In this you have been successful. Most teachers apply the school's chosen policy and provide pupils with dedicated time to improve their work. Pupils understand what they need to do to, and make improvements to their work by responding well to the comments teachers make. The practice is most successful in mathematics where teachers provide a 'can you work it out' question to either extend or consolidate a pupil's learning experience.
- Another area for improvement in the previous report was to improve handwriting and presentation. In this, too, you have been successful. Most teachers communicate high expectations and reinforce the school's policy and expectations. For example, in Year 4 pupils write neatly, forming their letters with care. Their books demonstrate good presentation from both boys and girls; a feature that is consistent across many subjects in the curriculum.
- Under the previous national system for measuring pupils' performance at the end of key stage 2, the proportion of pupils who attained the higher levels in mathematics was in line with the national average and had been for many years. In 2016, a lower proportion of pupils reached the new standard, particularly in mathematics. Fewer pupils than you anticipated reached the higher standard. You have already analysed the reasons and amended the practices and processes in school to ensure that for this academic year, pupils are better prepared for the increased expectations within the curriculum. Currently, your in-school assessment system is showing that the starting points in Year 6 are higher this year, as a result of the good progress these pupils made in their previous academic year. Pupils' work already in their exercise books shows this to be an accurate view.
- Through firm leadership, you have improved the way reading is taught, and given it a greater priority in lessons. As a result of these changes, pupils' achievement has risen. This is particularly evident in the greater

proportion of pupils who achieved the expected standards in the Year 1 phonics screening check. In 2016, nearly all children passed the check. In Year 2, those who did not achieve the expected standard previously, were also successful. The older pupils exhibit an enthusiasm for their reading. In one reading lesson seen, due to the effective questioning of the teacher, the pupils explained their understanding of the text clearly and articulately, identifying quotes to support their views and opinions.

- Governors are asking more direct and challenging questions about the progress that groups of pupils make. You and your leaders effectively track the proportion of pupils who reach at least the expectations for their age in each year group. You hold teachers to account for the accurate progress that groups of pupils are making over time and have identified that the most able pupils still need to achieve more. Where teachers are providing more regular opportunities for pupils to work at greater depth, particularly in writing, the most able pupils are rising to the higher expectations enthusiastically.
- You have already identified in your school improvement plans that the good progress that pupils make in the Reception Year needs to continue more consistently through into key stage 1, particularly in writing. Currently, you have two classes in Year 1. You provide time together for the teachers to plan learning so that pupils receive equality in the curriculum they receive. You are ensuring that as the school grows, it does not lose the nurture and care that is a distinctive feature. You are also determined to provide consistently high expectations for achievement, especially for the most able pupils.
- You offer appropriate and effective support to disadvantaged pupils. For example, through the work of the nurture group you provide the personal help and support these pupils might need. Consequently, disadvantaged pupils make strong progress both socially and academically as a result of the careful attention they receive. You also provide appropriate opportunities for the most able disadvantaged pupils. Through project work with another school you are ensuring that these pupils are motivated to learn and continuing to excel. There is still work to do to ensure that the difference between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and that of others nationally diminishes further so more pupils can make even better progress.
- Governors have a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school than at the time of the previous inspection. They visit the school to assure themselves of the progress pupils make and that standards of behaviour and safety remain high. The chair of the governing body gives clear direction and ensures that governors are reflective and evaluative about their own effectiveness. Governors are fully supportive of the work of you and your school leaders. They share your determination and commitment to improving standards for this academic year.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they accelerate the progress of the most able pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, so that attainment rises overall in key stage 2
- the quality of teaching consistently reaches the standard of the best so pupils can excel
- pupils make accelerated progress throughout key stage 2 during this academic year and beyond.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Brentwood, and the director of children's services for Southend-on-Sea. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Kim Hall
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior and middle leaders and representatives of the governing body. I visited every class to observe pupils in lessons, and I scrutinised their books to determine the progress they make over time. I evaluated a range of school documents, including information on pupils' progress, school improvement planning and the school's own evaluation of its performance. I checked the school's records for the recruitment of staff and of keeping pupils safe. I evaluated the school's website and found it to meet the Department for Education's requirements of the information maintained schools must publish.