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Mr Rob Dean
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dean

Short inspection of St Thomas CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 18 January 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 February 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. The school has continued to improve due to your secure and confident leadership. Through your dedication, and that of the deputy headteacher, you have provided pupils with a memorable educational experience. You, and all staff, have created a strong sense of care and nurture for the whole school community, underpinned by your strong Christian values. Staff who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire are proud to be part of St Thomas' and agree that the school is well led and that leaders are considerate of their well-being. You and your deputy have led staff in a shared commitment and enthusiasm to improve the school. The school motto, created by your pupils: 'respect, care, pray, believe and you will achieve', typifies the school, which pupils, parents and staff say feels like 'one big family'.

Most parents who spoke to me, or responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, are extremely positive about the school and would recommend it to others. A number of parents particularly appreciate that you and your staff are 'very visible around the school'. Comments from parents such as: 'Teachers are great and go the extra mile', and 'my child loves coming to school and is eager to learn', are typical. It is clear from my short time with you that this is a happy, purposeful school.

In 2016, a high proportion of children reached a good level of development at the end of Reception and the percentage of Year 1 pupils who met the expected standard in the national phonics screening check was above the national average. At the end of key stage 1, an above-average proportion of pupils reached the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics and at greater depth in reading and writing. In mathematics the percentage of pupils achieving greater depth was just below that for pupils of a similar age nationally, but you have been quick to identify the reasons for this. You have put actions in place to ensure that pupils are now back on track to achieve at greater depth in 2017 and in future years.

At the end of key stage 2, pupils achieved well above those of a similar age at the expected standard in writing, mathematics and grammar, punctuation and spelling. However, you are well aware that pupils achieved less well in reading. The quick actions you have put in place are already leading to improvement in these areas and pupils are now on track to achieve in reading at expected and higher standards.

Your drive for improvement has focused effectively on establishing high expectations and consistency in the quality of teaching and learning. This has ensured that there is a strong emphasis on achieving the very best for your pupils. You know each teacher's strengths and areas for development well. Staff have benefited from a range of training and are very motivated by opportunities to work together on projects and initiatives to develop the school. This has resulted in staff playing an important part in its success. You have sensible plans for you and your team to continue to look at and learn from outstanding practice, including in teaching and learning. This will support the next stage of your school's improvement journey.

At the previous inspection, inspectors identified a need to raise achievement in writing. You were asked to provide opportunities for pupils to write extended pieces of work; write more regularly across the curriculum; and improve pupils' understanding of the structure of sentences. Inspectors also asked that pupils were offered tasks that were sufficiently engaging and given the opportunity to move on to more challenging work more quickly. Finally, you were asked to extend the best practice that exists within the school.

Leaders have addressed all these aspects effectively and have ensured that the following improvements have taken place:

- Writing has a high profile in school; pupils in all year groups are regularly expected to write longer pieces of work, such as stories, accounts and letters. This they do both in their English lessons and in other subjects. The quality of resources offered to pupils to stimulate them in writing tasks is good, as is the way the skills are taught to develop writing. As a result, the majority of pupils are producing writing that is rich, creative and regularly leads to imaginative, extended pieces of work.
- Teachers use their subject knowledge and enthusiasm for teaching well to provide engaging and motivating activities in class. As a result, pupils have a very good attitude to learning.

- In lessons, teachers and other adults are vigilant in checking that pupils are confident in the skills they are learning and then quick to move pupils on to more challenging work. A number of the pupils spoken to by the inspector said they 'love the challenges they are given' and are 'encouraged to try harder because they (teachers) know we can do it'.
- Leaders have encouraged a culture within school of sharing good practice. To this end staff often ask to learn from their colleagues and work in small groups on areas of educational interest to develop professionally. As a result, staff are motivated to lead areas across the curriculum and some have gone on to gain promotion in and beyond the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

There are well-maintained systems in place in all areas of safeguarding and staff understand them. Safeguarding arrangements are regularly reviewed to ensure that they meet statutory requirements. Regular and appropriate training for staff and governors is undertaken and up to date, including that related to the 'Prevent' duty. You and your team are very diligent in ensuring that pupils are kept safe and their welfare needs are met. Your vigilance around the care and support of vulnerable pupils is of a good standard. Leaders have effective relationships with other agencies and are persistent in situations where vulnerable pupils need extra support or advocacy.

Pupils were unanimous in saying they feel very safe and well cared for in school. They are confident that adults will help them if needed. Pupils develop effective personal skills within a nurturing environment. Pupils talk with knowledge about the ways they can stay safe in a range of situations, including personally and online. The very large majority of parents feel that you and the staff keep their children safe and well looked after. As a result, pupils are happy and keen to come to school.

Inspection findings

- Your school's self-evaluation and school development plans are accurate and reflective. They capture your high expectations and insistence on consistency, and are used effectively to ensure that everyone in school is clear about the direction they are heading. Governors have used their own experiences well to play an active role in the life of the school. They are very supportive but are also able to challenge effectively where needed. You and your leadership team have a good capacity for improving the school further.
- Your middle leadership team are keen to make an important contribution to driving further improvements. They talk with enthusiasm and knowledge about their areas of responsibility, particularly when it involves developing aspects of the curriculum in more depth and making it even more lively and interesting for pupils through focus days and weeks.
- The information you gather about pupils' progress is appropriate. You have a clear and successful system that is used effectively by leaders, teachers and governors. This information clearly identifies which pupils or groups are making

progress and which need some additional support or challenge. You have refined your information gathering on pupils who are middle-attaining at the start of key stage 2. This increased focus has ensured that as many pupils as possible achieve at higher standards by the end of key stage 2.

- You have correctly identified the need to improve further the achievement of pupils at the end of key stage 2 in reading. To this end you have taken decisive action, including refining your reading curriculum, to extend and challenge learners further. For example, you have invested in extensive training for teachers and teaching assistants, changed how you approach group reading sessions and greatly increased the opportunities that pupils have to develop comprehension skills. You have done some impressive work to help parents to support their children in developing their understanding of what they are reading. These actions are already having a positive impact and evidence suggests that pupils are on track to make good and better progress.
- Overall, the outcomes for mathematics across school are a strength. However, you recognise the need to increase the opportunities for pupils to apply their mathematical skills through problem solving. This will be beneficial across the whole school but particularly at the end of key stage 1, so that more pupils have the opportunity to achieve at greater depth.
- There are a number of other strengths within the school. Pupils have very good attitudes to learning. For example, in Year 6 the classroom atmosphere is one of shared learning, enthusiasm and an eagerness to improve. Pupils are polite, kind and thoughtful to each other. Pupils rushing over to check that a child who had fallen over wasn't hurt, is typical. One pupil commented that everyone is accepted; 'whoever you are, you will be welcomed really well'.
- Pupils are enormously proud of the opportunities they have to be involved in external activities and beamed with excitement when telling me that they had performed at Birmingham Symphony Hall in the 'Music for Youth' competition in 2016. Other pupils were equally excited that they had represented the school and won the summer reading challenge for the third time.
- A strength of the school is your partnership with parents. Parents mentioned how very amenable staff are and how, if needed, you and your team take time to support not just their children, but families as well. They appreciate the dedicated time that teachers give to talking to parents and the opportunities, such as the reading and mathematics workshops, that you have provided for them to learn how they can help their child learn further. School events that include parents are extremely well attended, which is testament to the effectiveness of your approach.
- Most children start the early years with skills and knowledge that are typical for their age. There is very good-quality provision and teaching offered to Nursery and Reception children. As a result, children make at least good progress and are well equipped to start in Year 1. There is a wide range of stimulating, good-quality learning experiences available to children both inside and outside and children visibly enjoy engaging in them. As a result, children are happy and keen to learn. Parents say their child 'loves school' and the provision is 'really calming yet an exciting environment'.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to keep a close eye on raising achievement in reading across key stage 2
- pupils are offered more opportunities to apply their mathematical skills to solve problems and think more deeply about their work
- every opportunity is taken to learn from excellent practice in teaching and learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Sue Eastwood
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I met with you, your deputy headteacher, members of the middle leadership team, the early years leader and the special educational needs coordinator. I also met with the person responsible for maintaining safeguarding records. I met with pupils, three governors and a representative of Bolton local authority and I spoke to the chair of the governing body on the telephone. We visited lessons and I scrutinised pupils' work. I took account of the 70 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, as well as the views of six parents spoken to before the school day. I took account of the 21 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire and spoke to staff during the day. I observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and around school. I looked at a number of documents including: information about pupils' achievement; your school self-evaluation; the school improvement plan; behaviour and incident logs; and documents relating to safeguarding.