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26 June 2017

Mr Philip Morgan
Headteacher
St James' Church of England Primary School Blackburn
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Dear Mr Morgan

Short inspection of St James' Church of England Primary School Blackburn

Following my visit to the school on 13 June 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 April 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Under your self-assured and strong leadership the school has continued to go from strength to strength. Everyone in school lives up to your school motto, 'exceptional in all we do'.

You have created an environment that fosters the care and nurture of the whole school community, driven successfully by your Christian values. You, staff, parents and children are rightly proud of the 'family feel' that is such a strong feature at St James. This is an impressive accomplishment considering you are a large school based on three separate sites. You are ably assisted by your enthusiastic leadership team. Together, you ensure that high expectations enable pupils to flourish, both academically and in their personal development.

The overwhelming majority of parents who spoke to me, responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire or the paper version of the questionnaire sent out to parents, are extremely positive about the school and would recommend it to others. Many parents said that their children are 'keen to come to school' and that staff are 'friendly' and 'easy to talk to'. Parents also felt that whenever they had a problem, staff were quick to respond and sorted out any parental concerns well.

All staff who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire are proud to be part of St James and hold you in high regard. Staff share your vision and aspirations and there is a strong sense of the staff team working to achieve the very best for pupils.

At the previous inspection, inspectors identified a need to continue to raise the quality of teaching. They wanted you to make sure that work always challenges pupils, particularly the most able. You were asked to use assessment in the classroom to move pupils on to more-challenging activities quicker. You were also asked to offer pupils time to give feedback on comments made about their work and involve pupils in assessing their learning targets. Leaders have ensured that the following improvements have taken place:

- Since the previous inspection, there have been a number of changes to the teaching team. A proportion of these members of staff are new or nearly new to teaching. The excellent induction offered to staff has ensured that they have 'hit the ground running' and have quickly acquired a good standard of teaching skills that are having a very positive impact on the good progress, and often better, that pupils are making in their classes.
- Teachers' subject knowledge is strong. There is an emphasis on offering work to pupils that is matched closely to their needs and stretches them in their learning. The increased challenge and expectations in learning across the school have resulted in improved outcomes for pupils. For example, in 2016, the number of pupils achieving greater depth and higher standards by the end of key stages 1 and 2 is comparable to or above national averages. This is particularly strong in mathematics and grammar, punctuation and spelling.
- The exception has been writing at higher levels. Although attainment has been comparable to national averages in writing, it is not as high as you would like it, particularly at the end of key stage 2. However, you have had a proactive approach to addressing the teaching of writing across the school. This has had a very positive impact on the progress of pupils in this subject during this academic year. School assessment information indicates that many more pupils are now on track to achieve at greater depth in writing in 2017.
- Pupils are encouraged to be involved in their learning. They are familiar with their targets in English and mathematics and know what they need to do to improve. Pupils of all ages are confident and keen to talk about their learning. They regularly take opportunities to look through their work and make changes to improve it. They also benefit from opportunities to partner with a classmate to evaluate each other's work.

The improvement journey that the school has been on has resulted in the successful establishment of a strong foundation of confident and capable English and mathematics teaching throughout the whole school. It is evident from the work in pupils' books that there is an emphasis on creating opportunities to use English and mathematical skills across the curriculum, for example developing mathematics in science and narrative-writing in history. However, I agree with you that some subjects have not yet developed to the same high standard as in English and mathematics. I appreciate that this is an area that you and your leadership team are already beginning to address.

Your systems for monitoring attendance and following up absence are meticulous and applied conscientiously. Good attendance is rewarded and has a high profile.

However, attendance currently still hovers just below the national average. In response, your school attendance team have evaluated the persistent absence of pupils rigorously, including those that are disadvantaged or have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The attendance team have worked hard with this group of pupils and their parents and have had some notable successes. As a result, pupils' attendance is improving, but rightly this is still an important priority for the school.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your team have ensured that pupils have a very safe and secure environment by promoting the clear message that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Safeguarding records are kept rigorously, are detailed and are reviewed regularly to ensure that they meet statutory requirements. Appropriate training for staff and governors is undertaken frequently and is up to date, including that related to keeping pupils safe from radicalisation and extremism and female genital mutilation. Your vigilance, and that of your safeguarding team, around the care and support of vulnerable pupils is of the highest standard and is a strength. Leaders have extremely effective relationships with external agencies and are instrumental in contributing to the safeguarding of the vulnerable pupils in your care.

Pupils say that they feel very safe and well cared for in school. They feel very confident that adults will help them if needed. Pupils of all ages talk with knowledge about the ways they can stay safe in a range of situations, including personally and online. The overwhelming majority of parents feel that you and the staff keep children safe and well looked after.

Inspection findings

- It is clear to me that you are a motivating leader, who enables and nurtures your staff's development at every level. This has created an energy and a sense of shared responsibility for school improvement across the whole school. Over time, many staff have gained promotion successfully within school or further afield. You know your school well and have an accurate, honest view of its strengths and priorities. The members of the governing body bring a good range of skills to the role. They are supportive and also confident to challenge and make a valuable contribution to the school's drive for further improvement. Consequently, there is a very good capacity to improve the school further.
- A line of enquiry for the inspection was writing across the school. Having already identified this as a priority yourselves, writing now has a very high profile in school. Pupils are offered good-quality texts to stimulate and challenge them in their writing. Their work is enhanced by well-taught grammar, punctuation and spelling skills. Writing is celebrated in school and pupils clearly enjoy writing activities. For example, in Year 5, pupils were immersed in discussions about the Greek myth of 'Pandora's Box' to support them in their own writing.
- Another focus for the inspection was provision for children in the early years,

whose outcomes historically have been very low. With the acquisition of an early years centre, the school is now able to offer an education to children from the age of 2 years old. This, along with the revamp of the Reception classes, has transformed provision, resulting in children now making good progress from their starting points. A strong emphasis on communication skills, number, phonics, mark-making and sharing books is evident in all areas of provision, including outdoor provision. Many activities are developed through children's interests and these are well balanced with input and guidance from adults. Children visibly enjoy engaging in this wide range of activities.

- There are a number of strengths within the school. The gathering and use of assessment information is exemplary. Senior leaders have established a simple and effective system that staff at all levels use very successfully. Consequently, staff know pupils very well and use ongoing assessment flexibly to adjust planning to ensure that pupils' needs are met swiftly.
- The way that communication and language is taught in school is also a strength. The vast majority of pupils speak English as an additional language. A number of pupils have limited spoken English when they join the school. From early years onwards, children are immersed in speaking and listening through constant modelling from adults and peers. By the time pupils reach key stage 2, they are confident and articulate in spoken English.
- Pupils have very good attitudes to learning and are very proud of their school. They conduct themselves according to the school's Christian values such as honesty, respect, friendship and kindness. These are highly valued by pupils. As one pupil said, 'We use all the values every day because they are for living our life not just for school.'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that they:

- continue with the development of all curriculum subjects, so that they are of a similarly high standard as in English and mathematics.
- continue to develop strategies to support pupils who are persistently absent, so that they are given every chance to benefit from the good-quality education that is available to them.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Blackburn, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Blackburn with Darwen. 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 and other members of your senior leadership team. I also met with the person responsible for maintaining safeguarding records and your family support manager. I met with six governors, including the chair of the governing body. I met with a representative of Blackburn with Darwen local authority. We visited lessons and I scrutinised pupils' work. I took account of the two responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 14 responses to a paper version of the questionnaire sent out by the school. I also took account of the views of 15 parents who talked with me before the school day. Thirty-five responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire were considered and I spoke to staff during the day. I also met with a group of pupils. I observed pupils' behaviour in lessons and around school. I looked at school documents, including: information about pupils' achievement; your school self-evaluation; the school improvement plan; information related to the monitoring of teaching and learning and documents relating to safeguarding.