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5 September 2018

Mrs Bernadette Pye
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Pye

Short inspection of St Matthew's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 17 July 2018, 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in January 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You work productively with the whole-school community to create a friendly and inviting ethos that is highly valued by others. The very large majority of staff are extremely proud to work here; a real team spirit is tangible. Parents and carers are confident that staff listen and take their points of view seriously. They feel able to discuss any issues that arise, comfortably, describing staff as 'approachable', 'professional' and 'knowledgeable'. One parent's comment captured the viewpoints of others: '[St Matthew's] really does care about its pupils and families.' Your polite, sociable pupils corroborated their parents' positive opinions, saying that they 'love coming to school' each day. They described teachers as 'fun' and their peers as 'really helpful' and 'well behaved'.

The school became an academy in April 2015. Together, with the support of the trust, you set about tackling the recommendations highlighted in your predecessor school's inspection report.

You were asked to improve the ways in which writing was taught in the early years and in key stage 1. You have ensured that regular, good-quality professional training opportunities have equipped staff with greater confidence and skill in developing pupils' writing. Staff liaise with colleagues within and outside the trust to compare and evaluate the quality of pupils' writing. Teachers' expertise in the planning and assessment of writing has been honed, and adults now make sure that pupils have more frequent chances to write purposefully across the curriculum. Staff know individual pupils' needs well. They have realistically high expectations for most

pupils in terms of what they can do and achieve in their writing. In key stage 2 this year, a higher proportion of pupils than seen nationally reached the standards expected for their age in writing. From broadly typical starting points, this represents good progress overall.

The teaching and learning of phonics were also highlighted in the previous report as requiring attention. You were tasked to ensure that staff received training and pupils were able to use their phonics skills efficiently to spell accurately. You have successfully improved teaching and learning in this area. Adults articulate sounds precisely and support pupils effectively to make links between letters, sounds and spelling patterns. In Year 1, the proportion of pupils who pass the national phonics screening check has grown year on year and is now well above others nationally. In addition, the proportion of key stage 2 pupils reaching the expected standard in English grammar, spelling and punctuation has remained above national averages over time.

These findings demonstrate clearly the improvements that you have made in writing and phonics across key stages. Occasionally, however, the most able children in the early years and in key stage 1 make slower progress in their writing because they are not challenged as effectively as others. At times, adults do not demand enough of these pupils, compelling them to offer more in their writing, whether in terms of quantity or quality. For example, the most able children sometimes squash their writing into a restricted space or page when they clearly have more to say. Furthermore, in the early years, the most able children's spelling misconceptions are not addressed promptly. As a result, the proportion of pupils working at greater depth in writing by the end of key stage 1 remains slightly lower than that in other schools nationally.

Leaders look closely at teachers' planning and pupils' work across subjects to ensure that curriculum requirements are being met effectively. In science, for example, leaders are now suitably focused on fostering pupils' skills of investigation and enquiry. Staff have been enthused by a recently appointed, knowledgeable science leader who brings a great deal of expertise to bear on the subject. Consequently, pupils are working and thinking more scientifically and are deepening their grasp of core concepts. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in science in each key stage is well above the national average. Nonetheless, leaders do not yet track the progress of pupils in science or the wider curriculum subjects in a robust or consistent manner. Recognising this, your science leader is creating a priority action plan and is working to refine the school's assessment processes in science.

Pupils enjoy school and most arrive punctually. Rates of attendance have been above national averages over time. Recently, however, some pupils' attendance has faltered. At the time of inspection, the overall attendance figure was slightly lower than the national figure for primary schools in 2017. The attendance of disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and pupils who speak English as an additional language, in particular, is below national averages. You have sought support from the education welfare officer recently employed by the trust to help all parties to understand the

importance of good attendance and its links with pupils' future success. It is too soon to see whether attendance for these groups will benefit from this additional resource.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your staff know pupils and their families well and listen actively to their views. Several pupils explained clearly to me exactly why they feel safe coming here each day. They find staff particularly helpful if they have any concerns and use resources like the 'worry box' to explore specific issues that occasionally trouble them. One pupil told me that the 'internet safety' day that features regularly across the year has helped him to understand how to keep himself safe online. Pupils understand the benefits of information technology but are also aware of its potential risks. The very large majority of pupils who responded to the school's most recent survey of pupils' views feel very safe in school. They look after each other, behave well and conduct themselves sensibly in and around the environment.

Almost all parents who made their views known expressed confidence in the school's ability to protect and care for their children effectively. Several parents were keen to point out your evident concern for pupils' and adults' safety during the heavy snow in winter, when you provided support and guidance for all.

You have equipped staff with the skills needed to recognise potential vulnerabilities among pupils. Consequently, they respond promptly to any issues that arise. Staff know how and to whom they must report their concerns. They are able to see the links between recent safeguarding and child protection guidance and advice and their duties to protect and care for pupils. Documentation shows, however, that leaders and trustees sometimes do not ask searching enough questions of candidates at interview. You took immediate action during inspection to ensure that questions about safeguarding and the protection of children are a consistent feature of interviews across the trust partnership.

Inspection findings

- Pupils and supportive parents are real strengths of the school. Most parents hold your work and leadership in high regard. They value the 'excellent communication' system in place and the 'fabulous relationships' that staff have with pupils. Throughout the inspection, pupils modelled their good behaviour on the positive adults around them. They showed kindness and consideration towards each other, held doors open unbidden by adults and listened respectfully when others were talking. Innovative ideas contribute well to the strengths evident in pupils' personal, social and emotional skills development. The 'peace table' in the Reception class, where children expertly share their views and discuss any small disagreements in a mature and sensible manner, is a prime example of the enabling, nurturing culture that exists.
- Teaching and learning across key stages and subjects are good. In the Reception class, for example, children benefit from the regular opportunities they are afforded to apply their skills of reading, writing and mathematics. A particular

favourite with some children is their 'plan, do and review' books. In these, children write in sentences about how they will spend their afternoon, state clearly what they will do and predict how the task and learning might go. Pupils in both key stage 1 and 2 are benefiting from the sharpened focus you have placed on the speedy recall of number facts, reasoning and problem solving in mathematics. Pupils' books show that they use and apply their deepening mathematical understanding and skills in increasingly sophisticated ways as they move through each year. The large majority of pupils make good progress over time and leave the school at the end of key stage 2 well prepared for their secondary education across the curriculum.

- In 2016, pupils' progress in writing in key stage 2 was well below the national average. You took swift and successful action to ensure that teaching and learning in writing improved and, in 2017, in each key stage, pupils made average progress. Some of the most able pupils in the early years and key stage 1, however, are still not challenged effectively in their writing. For example, pupils' common misspelling errors are not addressed promptly and so are repeated over time. Alternatively, too little space on a worksheet or page is offered, causing pupils' writing quality to disintegrate and the amount of writing pupils can produce to be curtailed. Leaders who looked at pupils' work with me during inspection recognised these issues. They could see where tweaks in practice could be made to provide the most able pupils with greater challenge. Some immediate changes were being planned to ensure that all of the most able pupils make better progress in their writing.
- Science is a firm favourite among pupils. They talked excitedly about their learning and experiments. For example, Year 6 pupils capably described the identifiable characteristics of a wide variety of birds to me. They explained the concept of evolution, and the advantages and disadvantages of specific adaptations and variations, such as flightless birds, competently. The work in pupils' books and the school's own assessment information show that pupils make good progress in their learning in science over time. Leaders do not, however, track pupils' progress across the wider curriculum in a rigorous manner, relying too much on end-of-year information. A more strategic overview of what is working well and what needs to improve is currently being fashioned by the recently appointed science leader.
- Pupils' attendance has been a strength of the school over time, with overall rates being above the national average. Very recently, you have identified that some pupils' attendance has dipped. You have taken action to support and challenge families to ensure that all pupils attend frequently. Rewards are offered for good attendance, letters are issued to parents to notify them if their child's attendance is dropping and you have sought further guidance from the trust's recently appointed education welfare officer. You and trustees understand the need to maintain a close eye on this aspect of your work to ensure that all pupils continue to benefit from good attendance.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the most able children in the early years and in key stage 1 are challenged effectively to improve the quality of their writing and spelling
- pupils' progress in all subjects, including science, is tracked rigorously to accurately inform leaders' and teachers' planning and assessment information
- the attendance of disadvantaged pupils, pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities and pupils who speak English as an additional language, improves to at least match that of other pupils nationally
- leaders always ask searching questions of candidates at interview about child protection and safeguarding.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer or equivalent of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 were out of school. I met with you and subject leaders. I jointly observed teaching, learning and assessment in all key stages with you. I scrutinised work in pupils' books from each key stage and listened to pupils reading. I spoke with pupils from early years and key stage 2 and looked at the school's own survey of pupils' views. There were no responses by pupils, staff or parents to Ofsted's online questionnaires. I reviewed school documentation and information, including policies, assessment information, monitoring files and your school improvement plans. I met with trustees, including the chair of the local governing body and the chief executive officer of the St Thomas More Partnership. I held a telephone conversation with the local authority representative. I took account of 26 free-text comments from parents and the school's own survey of parents' views. I also considered the 14 responses from staff to Ofsted's printed questionnaire.