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Mrs Marie Graham
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Dear Mrs Graham

Short inspection of St Mary's RC Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 4 October 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Working alongside a hardworking and supportive governing body, your skilful leadership has brought about improvements to teaching and learning. You have successfully steered the school through challenging circumstances created by changes in staffing and leadership, not taking your eye off the ball in continually making improvements to pupils' learning. There is a tangible drive and sense of urgency to provide high-quality opportunities that allow pupils to thrive. You maintain that leadership is the responsibility of all staff, and you have created a skilful and highly effective school team in which morale remains high. The whole-school ethos is one of raising aspiration for all and is underpinned by a dogged determination to eradicate second best. It is easy to see why the school's motto, 'work, play, pray – together', is so apt.

Improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and assessment are accelerating quickly the rates of progress of current pupils across the school. The whole school team has diligently addressed issues raised at the last inspection, and successfully eradicated any weaknesses. Pupils' progress in writing has improved significantly, as has the quality of teaching in school. Teachers routinely establish high expectations. They accept no excuses for failure and work collaboratively to address issues that arise. You, governors and other school leaders keep a close eye on the quality of teaching, undertaking monitoring of teachers' planning for lessons and analysing work in pupils' books. You hold discussions with pupils about their learning and also spend time visiting classes to observe teaching and learning. You acknowledge that

pupils' progress and attainment in reading by the end of key stage 2 were not as strong as those found in writing and mathematics, although still higher than those found nationally. You have made this a key priority, and already there are improvements in the provisional assessments at the end of Year 6. Similarly, you acknowledge that the early writing skills of boys lag behind those of the girls, but high-quality planning and innovative teaching are reversing this trend.

Pupils respond well to the high expectations of staff and this is seen in their mainly excellent attitudes to learning in lessons. Pupils' strong relationships with adults remain a key strength of your highly inclusive school. Pupils develop excellent citizenship skills, being keen to take on responsibilities through roles such as being a member of the school council, a house captain, a pastoral care captain, a monitor role in each class, or aspiring to represent the school as head boy or head girl. Pupils take pride in the well-ordered and extremely tidy school environment, benefiting from high-quality displays in classes and shared areas. Pupils' behaviour in class and around school remains exemplary and the vast majority are very eager to work hard.

You have worked hard to develop a curriculum that meets the needs of your pupils, and fires their interest through visits to important sites across the region linked to their topic work. For example, areas of study such as the Romans, Egyptians, transport or rainforests have resulted in visits to local Roman forts, the Great North Museum, Shildon Railway Museum and Sunderland Winter Gardens. Teachers are skilled in following up pupils' interests, such as work on the local coastline leading to cycle trips and residential visits. Pupils are also gaining an appreciation of multi-cultural Britain and a deeper understanding of the wider world beyond their immediate locality.

Safeguarding is effective.

In your role as designated safeguarding leader, you ensure that policies, procedures and records are of high quality and up to date. Your determination to leave no stone unturned in your duty to keep pupils safe is exemplified by your desire to improve systems further through the introduction of an online system to report and maintain detailed records of concerns and incidents.

All staff are appropriately trained and have access to well-written policies and guidance. As a result, they have a secure understanding of their individual responsibilities for safeguarding. Pupils are very knowledgeable about bullying and e-safety. They understand how to avoid situations that may prove dangerous when not at school. A small number of parents responded to the online questionnaire, Parent View, but all were crystal clear that the school keeps their children very safe.

Inspection findings

- All children, including boys, are now getting off to a strong start in their writing. Starting with the two-year-old children and moving through early years, there are many interesting and varied opportunities for children to 'make marks' and explore writing alongside adults and peers both inside and outside. Teachers and teaching assistants are skilled in following children's interests, such as one boy who was reluctant to write until he was invited to write about one of his special interests – spiders!
- Books in which pupils write are valued and maintained from Nursery onwards. Children in the Reception class write during child-initiated activities, keep a news diary and write often in their writing books. Key stage 1 pupils follow the agreed school writing cycle, using a checklist to ensure that all aspects of a genre of writing have been covered. Pupils, including boys, are becoming skilled at evaluating their own work. Teachers plan writing activities that capture the interest of boys as well as girls, with a clear focus on non-fiction writing. There is strong evidence that boys are making more rapid progress in their early writing skills.
- You have ensured that the school continues to work tirelessly to ensure that all pupils are safe and well cared for. The strong relationships in school and high levels of trust between adults and pupils ensure that pupils' conduct in lessons and around school is exemplary. Pupils are polite, caring, considerate and friendly to each other and to visitors. Playtimes are harmonious occasions where pupils play happily together. Safeguarding is highly effective and the school's work to promote pupils' personal development and welfare is of high quality.
- Pupils enjoy their learning, and the vast majority work conscientiously. They have a clear understanding of which aspects of behaviour help them to learn, and which behaviours get in the way. In classrooms, pupils listen to adults attentively, and mostly respond immediately and without fuss to instructions. They collaborate with peers when asked, and drive themselves to complete tasks and challenges on time. There is a strong, tangible and significant family ethos in school, which quite rightly deserves its positive reputation in the local community.
- You acknowledge that pupils' progress and the standards they reach in reading in key stage 2 have not been as strong as those in mathematics and writing. You have introduced a number of strategies to raise the profile and importance of pupils' skills in reading so that they are able to infer meaning from text, extract key pieces of information, interpret a writer's intention and empathise with characters. There has been a strong focus on shared reading activities, such as in Year 3, where pupils were completing a comprehension task based on a news flash from 'Three Little Pigs'. Teaching assistants are skilled at providing effective and purposeful support for all pupils.

- Teachers ensure that parents have support when reading with their children, having prompts to ask questions about word skills and pupils' interests, and develop pupils' comprehension skills. Detailed logs of one-to-one reading with pupils are maintained, and extra-curricular reading clubs are offered, such as the 'Secret Club for Boys'. As new strategies and actions are becoming embedded, the standards reached by pupils in reading are rising, as seen in the provisional statutory reading assessment. Rates of progress are above those found nationally, but still fall some way behind pupils' progress in writing and mathematics.
- Staff and leaders at all levels share the same ambition to eradicate underperformance, and work tirelessly to solve problems and make continuous improvements, with teamwork being the catalyst for change. You have skilfully built a strong, effective team within school, with all members equally determined to drive forward further improvements and ensure that pupils have the opportunity to access a range of exciting and unique experiences to enhance and deepen their learning and knowledge. Morale within the school community is buoyant. Leaders, staff and governors share the same drive that places the all-round development and growth of each pupil at the heart of the school's purpose, so that every pupil grows academically, socially and emotionally.
- Governors bring a range of appropriate professional skills and experience to the school that enhance their effectiveness and impact. They share your passion and commitment and those of senior leaders. Governors receive high-quality information, are linked to different key aspects of the school, and are involved alongside leaders in monitoring activities. They are extremely proud of the school's achievements, and have well-thought-through plans to become even more effective in order to support and challenge the staff team.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- younger pupils continue to make strong progress with their writing skills, especially boys
- pupils' progress in reading continues to improve so that it is as strong as that in writing and mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

Philip Scott
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the deputy headteacher and the office manager. You and I visited lessons in each key stage. I met with the chair, and vice-chair, of the governing body and the school's local authority improvement partner. I spoke to pupils about their work and their views of the school. I listened to pupils read and looked in workbooks with you and when in lessons. A range of documents was considered relating to safeguarding and external evaluations of the school. I examined the school's self-evaluation, the school development plan, the school's monitoring of its own performance and tracking of current pupils' progress. I also scrutinised pupils' recent achievement in the 2017 statutory assessments, responses to the online questionnaire for parents, and the school's website.