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1 February 2019

Mrs Claire Jordan
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Jordan

Short inspection of St Columba's Roman Catholic Primary School Aided

Following my visit to the school on 4 December 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 the school was judged to be good in September 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment in January 2015, you have worked tirelessly to develop the school. You and your team know your school exceptionally well and you also know your parents. Parents are very positive about the school, as they showed in their responses to the Parent View survey, where almost all said they would recommend the school. One parent spoke for many when she wrote that she wanted to thank all of the staff doing, 'an amazing job in giving my children an exciting time at school... they're loving every day!'

You are well supported by the governing body. They know the school well and are clear that you have taken the staff with you in implementing any changes. All staff who responded to the survey stated that they were proud to be part of the school and enjoyed working at St Columba's. Middle leaders were able to describe the collaborative culture that you have built so that all teachers feel that they can contribute to new ways of working and the further development of the school. They are trusted to adapt school systems to the needs and age range of their class.

When we met, I asked you to identify some strengths of the school and to tell me what you would expect me to see in lessons. You drew my attention to the work you have been leading in developing teaching and learning to enable staff to support pupils' learning in different ways. You also identified excellent standards of behaviour and positive attitudes to learning among pupils. When we visited lessons together, these aspects were evident. Teachers use different teaching groupings within their classrooms and deploy teaching assistants very effectively. They use

assessment information to plan these groupings and the different activities pupils need to enable everyone to make good progress. I observed a wide range of activities, subjects and topics from English and mathematics to medieval castles and testing out model houses based on the story of 'The three little pigs'.

Pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning are impeccable. Pupils treat each other, staff and visitors with respect and care. They behave very well in class and around the school, including during break and lunchtime. Pupils enjoy talking about their work and their achievements. Older pupils eagerly take on roles as buddies to Reception children. The Year 6 pupils I met at lunchtime were very keen to introduce their buddies to me at afternoon break. Pupils support each other with their learning and take part in fruitful discussions. Year 6 pupils told me how they had welcomed pupils from abroad into their school. You, effectively supported by your whole staff team, instil strong values in pupils, such as respect and tolerance. These are underpinned by the Christian values of the school.

At the last inspection, the school was asked to improve the level of challenge provided in pupils' work, particularly for the most able. You have responded to this well. In mathematics, for example, work is typically challenging and enables pupils, including the most able pupils, to make good progress. There was a wide range of tasks in mathematics books. The quality of provision for most able pupils is checked regularly and reports are made to governors.

You have remodelled your curriculum so that it is more creative and places greater emphasis on developing pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding across the wider subjects of the curriculum, such as history, geography, design technology and art. However, as you acknowledge, this work needs to be developed further. Some Year 6 pupils also told me they had undertaken less work on the wider curriculum this year.

In the Ofsted pupil survey, pupils were very positive about most aspects of school life. Almost all pupils reported that they enjoy school. Pupils' responses were less positive, however, when asked if teachers give them challenging work.

Safeguarding is effective.

As headteacher and designated safeguarding lead, you have ensured that all policies are kept up to date and that your procedures are fit for purpose. You and your team work extremely well together and have created a strong culture of safeguarding in the school. This is underpinned by the deep knowledge you have of the community you serve. Staff are diligently aware of their roles and responsibilities when it comes to safeguarding pupils.

You all work unrelentingly to ensure that pupils are safe and that their safety, health and well-being are at the forefront of all that you do. Training for staff is appropriate and regular. Your team is quick to identify any pupils who may be experiencing problems or worries. This allows you to act swiftly and effectively so that pupils get the specific help they need. The links you have forged with external

agencies and support groups ensure that action is taken in a timely manner to care for some of your most vulnerable pupils. St Columba's is a truly inclusive school.

Records are thorough and meticulously kept, including those on recruiting staff. Governors take their roles regarding safeguarding very seriously, with a specific governor taking responsibility for supporting you with this work.

Pupils feel safe and are happy at school. They enjoy coming to school and do so on a regular basis. Pupils commented on the fact that bullying is rare and that they feel confident that if they have any worries or concerns an adult would sort them out swiftly. Pupils are overwhelmingly positive. They are proud to be a part of this inclusive, happy school community with its strong Christian ethos.

Inspection findings

- The first area I looked at was early years. In recent years, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception has been below average and so I wanted to check whether children are making good progress from their starting points.
- The early years environment is safe, attractive and rich in language. Children are happy and eager to learn. They talk with enthusiasm about their learning. A child in Reception, for example, was keen to tell me about reading and to demonstrate their good knowledge of letters and the sounds they represent.
- Children are well taught. They access a wide range of activities, both indoors and outside, which are carefully monitored to ensure they support children's learning effectively. Staff tailor their approaches to suit children's needs, such as giving children opportunities to work with tweezers to develop their fine-motor skills. Individual activities are combined effectively with group activities, such as teaching drawing. Children develop the skills they need to successfully hold a pencil and learn to write.
- Staff ensure that children's progress through the early years is recorded clearly in their learning journals. Thorough and careful checks are carried out, both within school and with the Catholic cluster and other local schools, to ensure that assessments of children's skills and progress are accurate and reliable.
- Early years staff work effectively to engage parents so that they can support their children's learning. Parents really value the new 'stay and play' sessions. Attendance at these sessions is high.
- You have successfully redesigned the early years curriculum so that there is a greater focus on developing children's reading, writing and number skills. The positive impact of this already reflects in their outcomes. In 2018, provisional data shows that the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of Reception has increased and is broadly in line with the provisional national average.
- I also looked at how well pupils are achieving in mathematics. You acknowledge that outcomes at the end of key stage 2 in this subject have not been good. In Year 6 in 2017 and 2018, attainment in mathematics has been below average;

pupils have not made good progress from their starting points.

- You and your team have taken effective action to improve pupils' achievement in mathematics. A calculation policy has been put in place to ensure consistency in the teaching and learning of mathematical operations. Work in pupils' books is well presented. It is set out in ways that help pupils to avoid making mistakes. Pupils are given work that is appropriate for their age and ability. Teachers use their assessments of what pupils already know and can do at the start of a unit of work to provide work that matches their varying skills and abilities. This information is also used effectively as a base on which to measure their progress.
- In order to support the professional development of your staff, you are working with the Great North Maths Hub. This partnership is having a positive effect on improving teaching and learning in mathematics. Teachers are encouraging pupils to talk about their learning, such as the methods they are using. Any misconceptions are identified and addressed swiftly as a result. Teachers, and pupils, report that pupils' confidence in mathematics is growing. However, opportunities for pupils to use and apply their mathematical reasoning and problem-solving skills, while increasing, need to be developed further. You agree that this is an important next step.
- You have taken effective action to ensure that pupils achieve well in reading. Across the school, pupils are making good progress. In key stage 1, most pupils develop the phonic knowledge needed to be able to decode words effectively. Teachers have a good understanding of pupils' reading skills and abilities. They regularly hear pupils read and assess their skills. This means that they are confident that the books they select for pupils to read are the right ones. In key stage 2, independence in reading is encouraged. In Year 6, pupils are expected to select what they read. Pupils are becoming increasingly confident readers. Although attainment in reading across the school is rising, you remain firmly focused on improving pupils' achievement in reading even further.
- You and your staff check the progress of different pupil groups carefully. From this, you and your governors make sure that the extra resources provided through additional funding, such as for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and for disadvantaged pupils, is spent well. This aspect of the school's work has improved significantly in the last two years.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the approach to developing pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding in subjects beyond English, mathematics and science is further developed so that pupils are more effectively challenged in their learning
- teaching and learning in mathematics is improved further by providing greater opportunities for pupils to develop their reasoning and problem-solving skills.

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 North Tyneside. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Cummings
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, your deputy headteacher and other leaders, including governors, to evaluate the strengths and areas for development across the school. We also discussed the actions taken to improve mathematics, provision in early years and the quality of teaching across the school since the previous inspection. Together, we visited all classes in each phase of the school. I discussed these observations with you and I reviewed a wide range of work in pupils' books, particularly in mathematics. I spoke to pupils, both formally and informally, about their learning and experiences of school. I listened to a group of pupils read. I read and scrutinised a wide range of school documentation, including the school's development plan. I also scrutinised attendance information and documents relating to behaviour, safeguarding and child protection. I spoke to parents and staff. I took into account the 18 responses to Ofsted's staff survey and the 42 responses to Parent View, including the 25 free-text responses from parents. One other response to the parental survey from a parent who could not get online and 99 responses to the pupil survey were also considered.