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Mrs Alison Richardson
Headteacher
St Stephen's Church of England Primary School
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Dear Mrs Richardson

Short inspection of St Stephen's Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 20 September 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 June 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You and your staff team have created a calm and happy school where pupils are nurtured and supported to achieve well. Pupils embody the Christian values which are central to the ethos of your school. During the inspection, I was quite overwhelmed by the consideration for others which pupils demonstrated. This was illustrated perfectly when one pupil acted quickly to ensure that I had a chair to sit on when I visited his classroom. Another pupil noticed me trying to look over a pupil's shoulder to see a resource card that her class was using, and immediately offered me her own copy. This concern for others extends to the tolerant attitudes that pupils articulate clearly. They told me that someone's religion, race, culture or abilities are irrelevant: 'what matters is the person you are underneath'. Pupils hold the staff team in high regard, recognising and appreciating the encouragement and help they receive from adults in school. Because they have such respect for staff, they concentrate and behave well in lessons and take pride in doing their best work. Parents are exceptionally positive about your leadership and the quality of education their children receive. One parent captured the mood of those who responded to Ofsted's online inspection questionnaire (Parent View), stating that this is, 'a wonderful school which goes above and beyond for every individual child'. All who responded indicated that they would recommend the school to others.

Since the previous inspection, you have improved many aspects of the school's provision because you are keenly aware of what is working well and what needs to be better. Your plans for improvement are meticulous. You set ambitious and precise targets to increase the achievement of specific groups of pupils. These detailed plans have helped you to make systematic improvements over time to the standards achieved by pupils. A higher than average proportion of pupils is now reaching the national expectation in Year 1 in phonics. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard at the end of Year 2 in reading and mathematics is above the national average. You acted quickly when standards at the end of Year 6 dipped in 2015. Since then, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics combined has been above the national average at the end of key stage 2. Your work to improve the quality of teaching has led to most pupils making strong progress across key stages 1 and 2. In particular, pupils with low prior attainment are making rapid progress to catch up with their peers. As a result, more pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education at secondary school.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to ensure that teaching met the needs of those pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Your coordinator for special educational needs has reviewed provision for this group of pupils carefully. Parents and pupils now have more opportunities to share their views with you about the help they receive. Pupils are benefiting from more precisely targeted support within and outside the classroom and this is enabling them to make better progress.

Since the previous inspection, you have overseen an improving trend of outcomes for children in the early years. This year, the proportion of children reaching the expected standard at the end of their Reception Year was in line with the national average. You recognise, however, that some disadvantaged children, including some boys, did not achieve as well as they could. You have identified this, correctly, as a priority for improvement this academic year. You also recognise that you need to keep a more precise check on how you use the pupil premium funding to improve the achievement of disadvantaged children in early years.

Teaching has ensured that the proportion of pupils reaching the highest standards of attainment in reading and writing is at least in line with the national average at key stages 1 and 2. However, across the school, you recognise that not enough pupils are reaching the highest standards in mathematics. You have already started work on this, but know that you have more to do to ensure that the most able pupils achieve as well as they can in this important subject.

Safeguarding is effective.

You manage safeguarding arrangements with the same diligence and precision that are applied to all other aspects of your work in school. Leaders and staff have received appropriate training, so that they have a clear grasp of their safeguarding responsibilities. Records show that leaders take prompt action, where concerns are identified, to keep pupils safe. Leaders make detailed and well-informed contributions to multi-agency meetings, ensuring that concerns are escalated to a higher level when circumstances do not improve quickly enough for pupils.

Pupils are helped to stay safe and to consider and manage risks to their safety through their 'family group' meetings. They spend an afternoon once a month in mixed-age groups looking at key issues such as online safety, British values and healthy lifestyles. This has enabled pupils to develop a good understanding of the things that might put them at greater risk of harm. Every parent who responded to Parent View indicated that they feel their child is safe and looked after well in school.

Inspection findings

- Over time, teachers have benefited from training and support to increase their understanding of the demands of the new national curriculum for mathematics. Teachers are tenacious in ensuring that pupils can quickly recall their number facts. Pupils are confident with written methods of calculation. You recognised that pupils needed the chance to tackle tricky problems and invested in resources to improve teachers' planning in this area of work. Leaders' work to improve the curriculum has ensured that the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard for their age in mathematics is above the national average by the end of key stages 1 and 2. However, sometimes, the most able pupils spend too long practising skills they have already mastered. They also do not have enough opportunities to explore or explain their mathematical reasoning. Consequently, too few pupils are reaching the highest standard in mathematics. You know this and have already begun to take steps to address this through additional professional development for staff.
- Since the previous inspection, you have worked to improve the learning environment for children in early years. Children have access to a range of resources, which promote their independence and curiosity. Most adults use questions effectively to support children to think about their learning. These improvements have led to an increase in the proportion of children reaching the expected standard for their age by the end of Reception Year. However, pupils' workbooks show that, sometimes, teaching is not focused sufficiently well on the needs of some disadvantaged children, including boys, who have starting points which are below those typically seen. As a result, too few are reaching the good level of development expected for their age.
- Leaders recognised that pupils were not achieving as well as they should in phonics. You purchased a new programme of work and staff received the training they needed to deliver it. The teaching of phonics has improved considerably and now gives pupils a firm foundation on which to develop their reading skills. The proportion of pupils reaching the nationally expected standard in phonics by the end of Year 1 is now high and the achievement of disadvantaged pupils in phonics has improved sharply.
- Leaders take pride in ensuring that staff work well as a team and they invest well in professional development for staff. A number of teaching assistants are receiving training to become teachers. Teachers newer to the profession are given opportunities to develop their leadership skills. This is resulting in strong improvements to the quality of teaching and the curriculum on offer to pupils. For example, the leader for geography has comprehensively reviewed the curriculum offer and the assessment system in her subject area. Pupils' work now shows that they make strong progress in the development of their geographical skills and knowledge. Staff appreciate the confidence that leaders show in them. All those staff who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire indicated that they feel well supported and challenged by leaders.

- Current assessment information shows that most disadvantaged pupils are making strong progress across key stages 1 and 2. Governors are able to explain how pupil premium funding is spent for disadvantaged pupils and regularly receive very detailed briefings from the headteacher to show how well disadvantaged pupils achieve. However, governors have not ensured that the impact of this funding has been reviewed sufficiently well, particularly for children in early years. They do not have a clear view about which actions are having the most impact on pupils' achievement and which are not working as well as they might. This limits the ability of the governing body to make strategic decisions about the future spending of this resource so that it is used to best effect.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- more pupils reach the highest standard of attainment in mathematics in key stages 1 and 2
- disadvantaged children, including boys, make more rapid progress in early years to catch up to the expected standard for their age by the end of Reception Year
- the impact of pupil premium funding is reviewed incisively.

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

Yours sincerely

Claire Brown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection, I met with you and other members of the leadership team. I also met with the chair of the governing board and two other governors. I discussed the school's journey of improvement with a representative of the local authority and the diocesan director of education. I visited classrooms to observe teaching and to look at pupils' work. I observed teaching and learning jointly with you and the deputy headteacher. I spoke to pupils during their lessons and also met with a group of pupils from Years 2, 4 and 6. I reviewed pupils' work in a range of subjects in a sample of their workbooks. You presented information outlining pupils' progress and attainment, the school self-evaluation document, the school development plan and your arrangements for checking on the performance of teachers. Documents relating to your work to safeguard pupils, including records of incidents, were checked. I reviewed the information and policies on the school's website. I considered the 31 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View), the 81 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire and the 10 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.