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14 January 2019

Mrs Moira Breeze
Head of School
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Dear Mrs Breeze

Short inspection of St Clare's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 11 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 July 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection.

St Clare's Catholic Primary School is a caring, welcoming and purposeful community. It is highly inclusive, because of your commitment to meet the needs of all pupils. In the words of one parent: 'The staff and children make the school feel like a family and there is a real community spirit.' Leaders and teachers have high expectations and enable pupils to meet them. Pupils take a pride in their work, present it well and try hard. Teachers plan activities carefully, so that they help pupils to take the next steps in their learning. Pupils enjoy finding out new things and are particularly enthused by the opportunity to apply their mathematics and science knowledge practically. During the inspection, pupils told me how they were using what they had learned to design and make 'bath bombs' for sale at the Christmas market. They could discuss the science behind the most successful designs, the mathematics involved in calculating the ingredients required and the price to charge to make a profit.

Pupils reflect on their work well, because teachers' questioning and feedback encourages them to think and make any necessary changes or corrections. Pupils said that the best things about the school were 'the teachers', and the fact that they 'learn lots of stuff!' Many pupils engage in activities outside the classroom that aid their personal development, with drama, music and physical education being particularly popular. You work effectively to promote the progress of pupils who face challenging circumstances, so that they typically attend and learn well.

Staff ensure that pupils behave well, both within the classroom and outside of it. Instances of serious misbehaviour are infrequent and are dealt with effectively. Typically, pupils get down to work quickly, because teachers show them what to do and how to do it. The tasks that pupils complete are usually suitably challenging. As a result, most make good progress and achieve well in the early years, and particularly so at key stage 1.

Together with other leaders and governors, you set high standards and check the quality of the school's work against these rigorously. Pupils' phonics learning is particularly strong, and their performance in the phonics check has improved markedly over recent years. In 2018, it was among the highest in the country. This is because you have made reading your top priority in the early years and at key stage 1, enabling all pupils to access the full curriculum. High-quality training for teachers and teaching assistants, close monitoring of pupils' reading ages, and additional one-to-one support for those who need it have all made a significant difference. Pupils continue to develop their enjoyment of reading at key stage 2. They are read to, and have somebody to read with, every day. By the end of key stage 2, pupils write with accuracy and clarity, for a range of purposes. They convey atmosphere, character and plot well when writing imaginatively.

Governors are highly ambitious for the school. They share your determination to provide pupils with the best possible education. They have a secure understanding of the school's strengths and provide both support and challenge where improvements are needed. Governors check the progress different groups of pupils are making and ask searching questions when things need to improve.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

Pupils at the school, together with their parents and carers, are rightly confident that the school is a safe place. Leaders, including governors, have created a culture in which safeguarding is everybody's responsibility. Staff know pupils very well and are aware of any changes in a pupil's appearance, attendance or behaviour that might be a cause for concern. They report these quickly. Leaders work tenaciously to ensure that pupils who need it receive appropriate help from external agencies. You follow up any unexplained or unauthorised absence promptly.

Pupils learn how to recognise and minimise different risks, including those relating to online gaming and social media, through the taught and wider curriculum. They told me that bullying is infrequent and usually dealt with effectively, and that prejudice-based bullying is exceptionally rare. The school's monitoring information supports this view. Pupils also made clear that there is always someone they can talk to at school if they have a problem. You make arrangements for counselling or other specialist support to meet the needs of pupils who face particular difficulties.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry involved establishing how well leaders promote good attendance and behaviour. In recent years, pupils' attendance overall has been slightly below the national average. The proportion of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, persistently absent from school has been above the national average.
- You are using every possible strategy to increase pupils' attendance at school. You monitor each pupil's rate of absence carefully, and work supportively with parents when absence becomes a cause for concern. Individual pupils benefit from timely and effective support that removes barriers to their attending regularly. Teachers help individuals who have been absent for protracted periods to catch up on missed work. In recent months, overall, pupils' rate of absence has fallen to below the national average. Disadvantaged pupils' attendance has increased considerably, and is now above the national average for this group.
- The proportion of pupils who received at least one fixed-term exclusion from school was above the national average in 2016/17. You have worked effectively to help the small number of pupils who find it difficult to manage their behaviour. Teachers apply the rewards and sanctions within the school's behaviour policy consistently. The incidence of serious instances of misbehaviour has declined markedly over the past year, as has the school's use of the sanction of fixed-term exclusion. Both are infrequent.
- My next line of enquiry involved establishing how far disadvantaged pupils are making good progress and achieving well at key stage 2. In 2018, some disadvantaged pupils at key stage 2 made too little progress and did not reach the expected standard in reading, writing or mathematics. Scrutiny of current pupils' work indicates that, typically, current disadvantaged pupils are making good progress at key stage 2 in English and mathematics, and similar progress to that of other pupils with the same starting points. This is confirmed by the school's monitoring information.
- In subjects other than English and mathematics, analysis of pupils' work indicates that disadvantaged pupils are acquiring knowledge and understanding at the same rate as other pupils. Pupils' progress in music, science, information and communication technology and physical education is particularly strong. However, in some subjects, including geography and history, pupils have insufficient opportunities to write at length. This limits their ability to develop their subject-specific skills.
- At the time of the previous inspection, the improvement in the teaching of mathematics across the school was found to be a priority. In 2017 and 2018, the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard at the end of key stage 1 was above the national average. The proportion who exceeded the expected standard was close to the national average. In 2018, the proportion of pupils who achieved the expected standard in the key stage 2 national tests fell and was below the national average. My final line of enquiry sought to establish how far current key stage 2 pupils, including the most able, are making good progress and achieving well in mathematics.

- Your analysis of the 2018 key stage 2 national test results indicated that some pupils' mistakes in arithmetic prevented them from achieving the expected standard by a narrow margin. You have put in place additional weekly lessons so that pupils can improve the fluency of their calculations. Teachers are monitoring pupils' progress in this respect on an ongoing basis. Daily 'maths meetings' are ensuring that pupils with learning misconceptions receive the help they need to correct these. Pupils also complete daily times-tables practice. Scrutiny of pupils' work indicates that these sessions, together with activities within lessons that are well matched to pupils' differing abilities, are aiding pupils' mathematical fluency. The school's monitoring information supports this.
- Pupils told me that they enjoy mathematics, and that the tasks they complete are neither too hard nor too easy. They know what they need to do to improve, because teachers give them ongoing feedback as they work, in line with the school's policy. This often helps pupils to correct errors at an early stage of their thinking or working, enabling them to solve more complex, multi-step problems.
- Typically, the most able pupils engage in more challenging tasks that are enabling them to develop their mathematical reasoning when they try to solve problems. Often these relate mathematics to the real world, such as when Year 5 pupils calculated angles correctly so that they could make three-dimensional stars as Christmas decorations. Working in this way is deepening these pupils' mathematical understanding. However, the extent to which pupils engage in tasks involving mathematical reasoning and problem-solving remains too uneven.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers enable pupils to develop their extended writing and subject-specific skills across the curriculum
- all pupils develop their reasoning and problem-solving skills in mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

Jason Howard
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, the executive headteacher, other senior and middle leaders, other school staff, governors and a group of pupils. Together with you and other leaders, I made short visits to a number of classes to observe teaching, look at pupils' books and see pupils at work. I reviewed samples of pupils' work. I evaluated school documents about self-evaluation, development planning and safeguarding, including the single central record and records of child protection. I also considered the 28 responses to the Ofsted questionnaire from parents, alongside other evidence about parental views and responses to the Ofsted staff and pupil surveys.