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Mr John Shelton
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Shelton

Short inspection of St Stephen's CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 30 January 2019, 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 February 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection, and is ensuring that the school continues to move forwards strongly. You, your fellow leaders and governors share an ambitious vision for St Stephen's. Since you took up your post in September 2018 you have quickly identified where the school's strengths lie, and where there are areas that need further development. You and your deputy, who is also relatively new to post, have developed concise, sharply focused plans for improvement which are already bearing fruit. Staff are overwhelmingly positive because they can see improvements taking effect. They say that they feel valued by school leaders and are proud to work at St Stephen's.

Pupils and parents are also extremely positive about the school. Pupils told me that they enjoy coming to school because their work is interesting and everyone gets on well together. They particularly appreciate the wide range of clubs that they can take part in after school, such as multi-sports, baking and cheerleading. They also enjoy going on school trips, including an annual residential visit for pupils in Year 6. Virtually all parents who responded to the Parent View survey would recommend the school to other parents, and one typical description of St Stephen's was that it is 'a great little school'.

Pupils are polite and welcoming to visitors. Their behaviour in class and around the school is consistently good, reflecting the school's six core values, which include friendship and trust. Pupils' typically positive attitudes to learning are demonstrated by the pride that they take in their work. Relationships throughout the school

between staff and pupils are warm and positive.

You have addressed the areas for improvement identified by the previous inspection. Pupils use a range of punctuation accurately to enhance their written work. Teachers provide pupils with opportunities to develop their written work in other subjects, such as when writing about a science experiment or describing a Viking attack. As a result of these improvements, pupils' attainment in writing is typically at least in line with the national average at the end of both key stage 1 and key stage 2.

Safeguarding is effective.

School leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and that staff have a good understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities. Staff and governors receive regular safeguarding training and all staff know what action to take if they are concerned about a pupil's welfare. Leaders work effectively in partnership with external agencies to ensure that any such concerns are addressed and support quickly put in place.

Leaders make sure that rigorous checks are made on staff, governors and regular visitors to the school to ensure that they are suitable people to work with children. Records of these checks are detailed and of a good quality. Pupils say they feel safe in school and are confident that their teachers will look after them. They have a good understanding of how to stay safe in different situations, such as when using the internet or going swimming.

Inspection findings

- The inspection focused on a number of key lines of enquiry. The first of these looked at how effectively reading is taught in key stage 2, as the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading was below average in both 2017 and 2018.
- You have targeted reading as a key area for improvement. You have ensured that reading is taught in a focused and consistent way, and have made sure that pupils are given plenty of opportunities to read with adults in school. You have engaged well with initiatives centred on reading that have been organised by the local authority, and this is helping to raise the profile of reading in school.
- Pupils in key stage 2 have very positive attitudes to reading. They talk enthusiastically about their favourite authors, including Jacqueline Wilson and Michael Morpurgo, and can explain what they particularly like about different types of books. Typically, pupils read fluently and with expression. However, at times the limitations of their vocabulary mean that they come across words that they do not understand, and this can affect their grasp of some of the subtleties of the book they are reading.
- The second line of enquiry focused on the quality of provision in early years. The proportion of children achieving a good level of development is consistently below average each year, and was particularly low in 2018.

- One key challenge for the early years staff is that children arrive in the Reception class from a large variety of pre-schools and nurseries, each having had a different range of pre-school experiences. For example, this year's class attended 14 different settings before coming to St Stephen's. You do not use this as an excuse though, and this year have worked with an early years specialist to ensure that provision is as effective as it can be. You have made improvements to the outdoor provision so that children can access a wider range of activities outside. When I visited, some children were happily engaged in a number-sorting game, while another group were using the snow to help them make a 'magic potion'. Adults were skilfully supporting children's learning, encouraging them to identify bigger and smaller numbers and to write a list of ingredients for their potion. This was helping to consolidate their learning and develop their speaking and listening skills.
- Early years staff are also now more clearly focused on identifying and then planning for the next steps in children's learning. They maintain good-quality records of children's achievements and use these to move their learning forward. For example, having identified that many children had gaps in their physical development, staff organised activities ranging from balance-bikes to dough-gym to develop their skills in this area. Children currently in early years are now making strong progress and an increasing proportion are working at a level typical for their age.
- My final line of enquiry looked at how well teachers are developing pupils' reading, writing and mathematical skills across the whole of the curriculum. This had been an area for improvement identified in the school's previous inspection report.
- Teachers give pupils plenty of opportunities to use these skills in different areas of the curriculum. As well as writing for different purposes, pupils use their literacy skills to carry out and record research tasks at home and in school. In science, pupils take measurements when carrying out experiments, and there are a number of examples of them recording information in bar charts in both science and geography.
- The school's curriculum is broad, covering a range of topics and themes, as well as providing pupils with opportunities to apply English and mathematical skills in different subjects. However, progression within different subjects is not strong. Work from one year to the next does not require pupils to build up their skills and knowledge over time, and so pupils often repeat similar work in different classes. For example, pupils in all four classes in key stage 2 completed very similar activities identifying European countries on a map, with no clear increase in complexity or expectation from one year group to the next. Consequently, too many activities in science, history and geography fail to provide pupils with any degree of challenge and so their learning in these areas of the curriculum lacks depth.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers extend pupils' vocabulary in order to strengthen their reading comprehension skills
- in subjects other than mathematics and English, there is clearer progression in how pupils' subject knowledge and skills are developed over time so that the curriculum successfully extends and deepens their learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Dixon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short inspection I met with you and other school leaders. I also had meetings with three members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I met one group of pupils to talk about school life and heard another group of pupils read. I took account of 12 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including some free-text replies. I also considered 21 responses to the staff survey. I visited classes in the early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2, and I looked at examples of pupils' work. I also studied a range of documentation covering different aspects of the school's work.