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Mr Simon Horleston
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Horleston

Short inspection of St John's CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 8 November 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 previous inspection. You are an effective headteacher who has quickly gained the confidence and support of staff at St John's. As a result, the vast majority of staff who responded to the online survey agreed that the school is well led and managed and that they enjoy working at the school.

You took up your post as headteacher at St John's in September and already have a clear plan for the school. Your governors know the school well and are very aware of the impact of many staff changes over the past few years. Together you have a clear, shared understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. You work closely with the local authority and the diocese to improve the school, through, for example, undertaking joint monitoring activities.

The behaviour of pupils around the school and in lessons is calm and purposeful. This is because pupils are respectful and accepting of others. Pupils have a clear understanding of bullying and know what to do if it occurs. They listen carefully in lessons and are enthusiastic about their learning. The vast majority of respondents to Parent View (Ofsted's online questionnaire) agreed that the school ensures that its pupils are well behaved. One parent spoke for many in saying that St John's is, 'a lovely school, where children are well behaved and have strong values reinforced regularly in a positive way. We are so pleased with our son's progress, and it's lovely to see him so happy to run into school every morning.'

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your staff ensure that there is an effective culture of safeguarding. Safer recruitment procedures are followed and all pre-employment checks are in place. Records of safeguarding incidents are detailed and demonstrate that you engage well with other agencies to keep pupils safe. Consequently, all parents who completed Parent View agree that their child feels safe in school. Staff were equally positive about the school's culture of safeguarding, with all respondents to the staff survey agreeing that, 'pupils are safe at this school'. Staff receive regular safeguarding updates and are clear whom they should go to if they have a concern. While staff know what to do to keep pupils safe, they were not always clear about where they can go to find out further information around safeguarding, for example where details can be found on the school's website.

Pupils told the inspector that they are taught how to keep themselves safe both in and out of school. They are knowledgeable about areas ranging from e-safety to road safety. Pupils said that they could talk to any member of staff if they were worried and knew the adults in school were there to help them keep safe. Almost all pupils who completed a survey indicated that they feel safe when they are at school.

Inspection findings

- My first line of enquiry was to look at attendance. This was because in 2016, overall pupil attendance was above the national average. However, the attendance of pupils who are disadvantaged was below the national average and in the bottom 10% of schools nationally. You have quickly and clearly identified this issue since you took up post in September. You and your staff have acted swiftly to ensure that all pupils attend school regularly. The school works closely with the county attendance improvement officer to reduce the absence rates for specific families. As a consequence, the attendance of pupils who are disadvantaged has risen in 2017.
- The concern about the attendance of disadvantaged pupils is that it can have a detrimental effect on their progress. Unvalidated results for key stage 2 tests in 2017 show that the progress of pupils who are disadvantaged is in line with or better than that of other pupils nationally. Equally, the majority of pupils' work seen during the inspection shows that disadvantaged pupils are making good progress.
- To confirm that the school remains good, my second line of enquiry focused on how effectively leaders and governors secure the best outcomes for all children in early years. During the inspection, observations took place in both the Nursery class and the Reception class. In both areas, fun activities were set up for the children to explore, including those intended to improve their mastery of mathematics and phonics. For example, a range of one- and two-digit numbers up to 20 had been drawn in chalk on pieces of backing paper. The children took great delight in filling up water pistols, identifying a number and squirting the number to erase it. Equally, children excitedly identified for the inspector upper-case and lower-case letters they had searched for and found in a tub full of foam.

Children's written work and records of observations by staff were also scrutinised in Reception. These show that children are developing well and producing work at a level appropriate for their age.

- Part of the concern around early years was based on historical data. For example, 69% of children at St John's in 2014 achieved a good level of development in mathematics by the end of Reception. However, 93% of this same cohort went on to reach the expected standard in mathematics at the end of Year 2 in 2016. You, governors and the local authority recognise that the accuracy of assessment in early years is an area requiring further development.
- My third line of enquiry related to standards in writing. This is because by the end of key stage 2 in 2017, unvalidated assessment information shows that pupils' progress in writing and mathematics is in line with national standards, whereas progress in reading is above the national average. However, the weakest of these three areas at St John's is writing. This raised the question of how leaders are ensuring sustained improvements in progress and attainment in writing for all pupils in key stage 2.
- During the inspection, we undertook joint observations across key stage 2. In these classes, teachers make effective use of their subject knowledge to plan appropriately demanding activities for pupils. For example, the pupils demonstrated their clear understanding of technical terms such as 'cinquain' through the written work they had produced. Equally, the pupils demonstrated their knowledge by confidently explaining to the inspector what a cinquain is. In the best examples, teachers use questions well to check pupils' understanding and correct any misconceptions. As a result, pupils are confident in class, work hard and generally make good progress. However, there are a few inconsistencies in the quality of pupils' writing that you have identified need addressing.
- You, your deputy and your governors have a coherent and ambitious view of the school. Together, you have clearly identified how the school needs to improve so that pupils are prepared for the next stage in their education. In particular, you have identified writing as the weaker area at the end of key stage 2 and are ambitious to raise pupils' outcomes from being in line with the national average to being above the national average.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- staff are clear about where they can go to access specific information about safeguarding, including on the school's website
- the accuracy of assessment in early years improves
- inconsistencies in the quality of pupils' writing is addressed so that pupils make better progress.

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

Yours sincerely

James Adkins
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your deputy headteacher. I also met with the chair of the governing body and one other governor, as well as discussing the school with a representative of the local authority. Together, we visited key stage 2 classrooms and jointly observed teaching and learning. I also visited early years on my own to observe teaching and learning. I spoke to pupils during their lessons and met with a group of pupils from Years 1 to 6 at lunchtime. I reviewed pupils' work in lessons and in a separate work sampling. You presented information, including attendance information, performance data, the school's self-evaluation document and the school's development plan. I scrutinised safeguarding records and discussed with you a wide range of matters related to safeguarding, including vetting procedures. I reviewed the information and policies on the school's website. I considered the 38 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View), the 62 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire and the 16 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.