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Mr Gavin Shortall
Headteacher
St James' CofE Primary School, Birch-in-Rusholme
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Dear Mr Shortall

Short inspection of St James' CofE Primary School, Birch-in-Rusholme

Following my visit to the school on 10 October 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 March 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 other leaders are ambitious for pupils to achieve the best possible outcomes. You are a highly perceptive and effective headteacher. Though pupils typically make strong progress in their learning, you constantly seek ways in which the quality of education can be even better. You accurately identify areas for development, such as increasing the proportion of pupils who achieve greater depth or the high standard, and devise appropriate actions.

You have successfully addressed the areas for improvement that inspectors identified in the last inspection report.

Teaching is now consistently effective and all pupils make at least good progress. You regularly provide opportunities for staff to share and observe strong practice in your school and in other schools. You also have a more regular focus during your programme of staff training on the quality of teaching and learning through, for example, moderation of writing across the school. Teaching assistants are now part of a more thorough process to check on their performance, which is similar to the system you have for teachers. You have also improved the outdoor area in the early years. This now provides opportunities for children to develop a range of skills that support their physical development as well as their understanding of language and number.

You have strengthened the role of other school leaders, including subject leaders, effectively. You have delegated greater responsibilities over time, creating, for instance, the role of teaching and learning lead within the senior leadership team. Subject leaders now play a more meaningful part in checking on the quality of teaching and learning in their subject. They devise and evaluate action plans for improvement each year. You realise, however, that the plans for subjects other than English and mathematics do not have a sharp enough focus on the impact of actions on pupils' achievement.

A group of Year 6 pupils told me they really enjoy coming to school. You have created a learning environment where they feel that staff look after them well and encourage them to do their best. You support their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development effectively through, for instance, planned programmes of assemblies and a variety of clubs, covering interests like multi-sports, film reviewing and sewing. They visit places of interest, such as Formby squirrel reserve, which add excitement to their learning. You promote fundamental British values well by, for example, teaching pupils about other faiths in religious education lessons and holding elections for the school's 'Pupils' Parliament', which operates like a school council.

I held a discussion with staff who are not senior leaders. They told me that they benefit from the training you organise for them, which includes courses and opportunities to observe good practice in other classrooms, both in and out of school. They also gave a clear message that they care deeply about their pupils, saying: 'We treat them like our own children.' They are very positive about the work of the school and their contribution to it.

The large majority of parents who responded to Parent View, Ofsted's online survey, were also very positive. They feel that pupils progress well and that the school is a happy environment that is warm and welcoming. Typical comments included, 'Every child feels valued.'

The local authority provides effective support, although it has an understandably 'light touch' approach. Advisers know the school's strengths and areas for development well.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. You make referrals to other agencies, such as social services, promptly when required, although there are very few cases where this has been necessary. The school's record of checks on members of staff meets requirements. However, you acknowledge that there are some minor administrative errors, which you have undertaken to correct.

The culture of safeguarding in the school is strong. There is a suitable safeguarding policy in place. As a result of effective training, staff are knowledgeable about the correct safeguarding procedures and how to recognise signs of abuse. Pupils feel

safe in school and know that adults will help them if they have concerns. They know how to stay safe online because adults give them the knowledge they need to do so. They also know about different types of bullying, including racist and homophobic. They told me that incidents of bullying are rare, but that staff would manage them effectively if they occurred.

You have also taken effective action to reduce absence and persistent absence in school. All groups of pupils have much-improved attendance compared with 2016. This comes from strategies such as closer tracking and recording of absentees and early help for disadvantaged pupils through the provision of free places at the school's breakfast club.

Inspection findings

- At the start of my visit we agreed a number of key lines of enquiry for the inspection. I have already written about how well you have addressed the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection and whether safeguarding is effective.
- Another key line of enquiry was about the progress of children in the early years. The evidence demonstrates that they make strong progress from their starting points. Unvalidated assessment information for 2017 shows that the proportion of children achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception rose compared with last year's class and is now above the national average. I also saw a wide variety of activities supporting good development in a range of areas, including language, number and social skills. There were some effective examples of questioning by teachers to challenge children to think hard. These included asking about common features of animals and about how to compare the heights of structures the children had made from building blocks. You recognise, however, that the proportion of children who exceed the expected standard at the end of Reception is low. You have already put plans in place to address this, such as introducing a more focused system to track and analyse children's progress.
- Another focus concerned the progress of pupils in Year 6 in English and mathematics at the end of 2017. Although there was a slight dip from the above-average progress of 2016, achievement in these subjects at the end of 2017 was still good when compared to national averages. Furthermore, current pupils make good progress. Nevertheless, you have demonstrated your ambition for your pupils by focusing on improving achievement in reading this year, so that it is closer to that in writing and in mathematics. To that end, you have revised the way you review guided reading to focus on the gaps that you identify in pupils' reading skills. You have also raised the profile of reading in school by buying improved resources. You recognise that your pupils have shown that they can make progress in English and mathematics that is significantly above the national average, but this is not currently consistent or sustained.
- My next key line of enquiry related to the effectiveness with which leaders challenge the most able pupils. You have already identified that the proportions of pupils achieving greater depth by the end of Year 2 and the high standard by

the end of Year 6 are not consistently high enough. You have swiftly included an action in your plans for school improvement that ensures that teachers challenge these pupils more. I saw clear evidence that most-able pupils complete work that is of a higher standard. For example, most-able pupils in Year 5 write sentences with attempts at more sophisticated vocabulary, such as 'devestating' (devastating) and 'evacuted' (evacuated). In mathematics they solve problems involving the use of a formal method to multiply three-digit numbers by two-digit numbers. However, there were fewer examples of most-able pupils in key stage 1, for example, having opportunities to produce more sustained writing in subjects such as history. Similarly, in mathematics in key stage 2, teachers do not consistently challenge most-able pupils to justify their responses so that they can learn at a deeper level.

- Finally, governors carry out their duties very effectively. They know the school and its priorities well and have an excellent working relationship with you and your school leaders. They provide strong challenge and support and they hold you and your senior leadership team robustly to account.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they secure sustained, accelerated progress for pupils in English and mathematics
- they challenge the most able pupils, including children in the early years, more consistently in order to raise the proportion working to a higher standard
- action plans for improvement for subjects other than English and mathematics have a sharp focus on the impact of actions on pupils' achievement
- they correct the minor administrative errors in the school's record of checks on members of staff.

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 Manchester. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mark Quinn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

With you, I carried out short visits to the early years and most year groups in key stage 1 and key stage 2. I scrutinised a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation summary, action plans for school improvement, records of incidents of bullying and misbehaviour, minutes of meetings of the governing body

and records connected with the safeguarding of children. I held discussions with you, senior leaders, other members of staff, governors and pupils. I had a discussion with a representative of the local authority. I analysed pupils' work and the school's own assessment information. I evaluated 38 responses received through Parent View, Ofsted's online survey. I also analysed 20 responses to the staff questionnaire. There were no other survey responses.