

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Fiona Conley
Executive Headteacher
St Joseph's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School
Highford Lane
Hexham
Northumberland
NE46 2DD

Dear Mrs Conley

Short inspection of St Joseph's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Middle School

Following my visit to the school on 13 June 2018 with Jill Bowe, Ofsted Inspector, 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.

Yours is a caring school that provides a supportive environment for your pupils. One parent who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, wrote, 'St Joseph's has provided an exceptional learning and nurturing environment for my son.' Another explained, 'My daughter is encouraged to develop as an individual. Her strengths are recognised, and she is known and cared for by staff.' These typify the very many positive comments received from parents and carers. In addition, staff morale is high, and pupils are happy to be at school.

Pupils at your school typically feel part of a vibrant and inclusive community. Pupils talked animatedly about how pupils of all faiths, or none, are welcomed into your school family. There is a focus on the arts at school, and the number of opportunities available linked to the arts is impressive. Where music is concerned, for example, pupils can be part of an orchestra, choir or ensemble. They can learn to play string, brass or woodwind instruments. There are pop-up groups across the course of the year, which have included jazz bands and rock groups. Your pupils are currently practising for 'High School Musical', part of your biennial performance programme, which brings the whole school community together. Sporting activities on offer to pupils are equal in number, variety and quality. Yours is a school that develops pupils' skills through high-quality additional curriculum experiences.

Teaching at your school is characterised by high expectations of what pupils can achieve. Subject knowledge is at the centre of lesson planning, and this, together with teaching that sparks pupils' interests, ensures that the standards that pupils reach are high. The focus and commitment of pupils in class are first rate. Teachers plan a variety of activities that engage pupils and they observe them keenly when learning. Teachers then question pupils further, or change tack, depending on how quickly individuals grasp specific concepts. This agile approach on the part of the teachers helps pupils to learn effectively. Strong classroom routines are adhered to by pupils. This tight classroom management supports pupils who need more encouragement to stay focused or behave. These pupils rise to meet your requirements for behaviour. You are aware that the profile of teaching at school is stronger at key stage 3 than at key stage 2. You are working with your senior team and members of staff to address this.

Since your appointment, and that of your highly effective deputy headteacher, you have moved quickly to identify any areas of weakness at school and improve provision for the good of the pupils in your care. You both now have a proven track record of so doing. Initially, you set out to develop assessment systems. You wanted to improve the way that you track the progress that pupils make and the standards that they reach. This system is now strong. You then noted that some elements of the transition process into Year 5 could be improved. This area of school life is now also strong. More recently, you have identified that a greater number of pupils ought to be reaching the very highest levels of attainment. Inspection evidence confirms that you are seeing success in this endeavour too, as a greater proportion of pupils now exhibit knowledge, skills and understanding commensurate with higher standards in national tests. Your understanding of school improvement is secure.

You and your team have been addressing the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. You have overhauled the accountability processes in school and these are now effective. Your work to continually improve the quality of teaching continues. There is evidence of an improvement in the progress that pupils are making in mathematics. Standards of attainment are high across the curriculum. These developments show that you have had success in improving provision.

You, together with your team and members of the governing body, are by no means complacent. In advance of this inspection, you had already identified aspects of teaching that could be further improved. You are aware that, although disadvantaged pupils are making strong progress, their attainment needs to rise even further so that they can 'fly' when they reach high school.

The commitment of your senior team, middle leaders, members of staff and governors is palpable. Your care for the pupils at school is clearly evident. The impact of this is that yours is a happy school, where pupils work hard, make strong progress and develop into rounded young people ready for the next stage of their education.

Safeguarding is effective.

Policies and procedures linked to safeguarding are effective. You have ensured that staff are up to date with the latest safeguarding advice and that all staff are appropriately trained in safeguarding.

There is clearly a culture of safeguarding and care at your school. Pupils are courteous and polite. They are sensible when moving around the school, follow the one-way system and treat the school environment with respect. Pupils said that, if ever other pupils are being unkind, teachers and other adults sort it out immediately. They said that bullying is rare and is always dealt with quickly. Parents, pupils and staff are overwhelmingly positive about the standards of behaviour and the care and support offered to pupils at school. Of particular note, pupils strongly underlined to inspectors that there is always an adult to talk to should they need this.

The curriculum that you offer ensures that pupils learn about safety, explore the world around them and develop leadership skills. For example, there is a focus on protecting the environment, making international links and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. You encourage pupils to cycle regularly, drink water to stay hydrated and bring healthy snacks to school. There is 'lunchbox guidance' on the website. You make sure that pupils consider their mental health, become socially aware and develop spiritually through the inclusive Catholic ethos that pervades the school.

We noted together, however, that the way that some safeguarding information has been recorded, was not as clear as it could have been. It was difficult to check, for example, quite how tenacious you and other leaders have been in following up external support for more vulnerable pupils or the few pupils who are persistently absent. Similarly, the strategies that you use to help pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, and their impact, are not always recorded as precisely as they could be. You have recently changed the way in which you note any concerns you have about pupils and you now use an electronic system. This has already had a positive impact on this area of school life. We discussed the need for a very keen eye on every element of safeguarding at school.

Inspection findings

- As part of the inspection, I wanted to look at how effective the teaching of mathematics is at school. I judge the teaching of mathematics to be strong and that it continues to improve. Pupils benefit from activities that enable them to practise simple calculations and push their thinking by asking them to describe mathematical concepts and solve mathematical problems. The standards that pupils reach by the end of Year 8 in this subject are well above the national average. The quality of teaching is particularly effective in key stage 3. Here, teachers are adept at spotting any misconceptions and challenging pupils' thinking accordingly. Although improvements are evident, you agree with me that the leadership of mathematics at school needs to be further strengthened.
- I also wanted to consider how well reading is taught at school. Inspection evidence confirms that there has been an improvement in the teaching of skills

such as deduction and inference. Pupils were seen to be engaging well in developing these skills. You have also ensured that, where pupils are falling behind in reading, small group work is used effectively to help individual pupils to catch up.

- Parents are particularly impressed with some of the wider strategies that have been implemented in relation to reading. They mentioned the renovation of the library and special events when authors, cartoonists and poetry publishers have been to school to speak to pupils. This has complemented the curriculum. Parents also commented on homework tasks linked to reading, which they consider to be effective. Inspectors noted, however, that the standards that some pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities are reaching in reading are too low.
- One of my areas of focus was the extent to which you and your staff are ensuring that most-able pupils reach their potential. I wanted to look at this because too small a proportion of these pupils reached the higher standards in national tests at the end of key stage 2 in 2017. Inspection evidence confirms that the most able pupils currently at school are making strong progress and reaching high levels of attainment. Teachers use questioning well to push these pupils forward in their learning.
- The use of 'triple challenges' in lessons is not only consistent across the school, it also allows most-able pupils to challenge themselves to extend their learning, which they often do, and to great effect. Here, pupils select for themselves the difficulty of task that they attempt and try to push themselves to make greater gains in their learning. Teachers also encourage pupils to reflect on their work deeply and to redraft and reshape their work before it is formally marked. This, too, is helping to develop these pupils' resilience, independence and ability.
- Another line of questioning was around how well you plan for subjects other than English and mathematics. You and your staff do this effectively. One striking feature of your school is how high expectations are of standards of attainment. Inspectors observed learning in a wide variety of subjects and saw pupils grapple with complex concepts across the curriculum, including in music, French, art and science.
- You and your staff use assessment information well to track the progress that pupils are making in subjects across the curriculum. Your middle leaders are proficient in their understanding and use of this information. This helps them to support individuals or groups of pupils who need that extra push to help them understand an idea, or to make progress in a particular subject.
- Although not a focus for this inspection, I noted the high standards that pupils are reaching in writing. I saw excellent examples of extended writing, both in English and in other subjects. In addition, your teachers have ensured that the contexts used for writing are both exciting and realistic. Pupils had produced some stunning work in English linked to the First World War. Others were observed preparing to write at length about a murder enquiry, using evidence and clues to develop both their writing skills and their critical thinking. Exercise books in history, geography and science also exemplified your focus on developing writing skills.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the quality of teaching at key stage 2 is further improved
- the standards of attainment of disadvantaged pupils are raised
- relevant processes and procedures are tightened, so that vulnerable pupils are given the highest quality support available.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Wardle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

As part of this inspection, I looked at the rates of progress that pupils are making, and the standards that they are reaching, in mathematics. I also considered how well the school is supporting pupils to develop reading skills. I explored the extent to which the most able pupils are being pushed in lessons and in different subjects across the curriculum. I also wanted to know how well leaders are tracking the progress that pupils are making in subjects other than English and mathematics. In addition, I looked at how adults ensure that school is a caring and inclusive environment, and to what extent there is a culture of safeguarding in the school community.

During the inspection, inspectors met with you, the deputy headteacher, the assistant headteacher, and a group of middle leaders. I met with a representative from the local authority and spoke with three members of the governing body. An inspector spoke to parents at the beginning of the day, and we spoke with groups of pupils across the course of the inspection. We observed teaching and learning with members of the senior team, and reviewed pupils' work from different year groups and from a variety of subjects. An inspector listened to some pupils read. You presented the school development plan, the school's self-evaluation document and information detailing pupils' progress and attainment. A variety of other documents was considered, including those relating to safeguarding and policies on the school's website. I also considered the 36 responses to Parent View (including free-text comments), the 17 responses to the staff questionnaire and the 81 responses to the pupil questionnaire.