

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Sarah Clayton
Headteacher
St Mary's Catholic Primary School
Church Road
Brighton
BN41 1LB

Dear Ms Clayton,

Short inspection of St Mary's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 14 March 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. This was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in April 2014.

This school continues to be good.

You and the leadership team have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your inspiring and determined approach has ensured that the very great majority of pupils make good progress and achieve at least the standards expected, and increasing numbers go beyond. Outcomes in mathematics are particularly strong.

Parents and carers are very supportive of the school's work. As the school is serving an ever more diverse community, you and your team have rightly focused on inclusion. The parents I met and those who wrote to me as part of the inspection, including a refugee family, were fulsome in praising the school's work with them. Bilingual children were similarly keen to talk to me about all that is done for them. You are rightly making the most of what the city has to offer by way of support services for these members of the community.

Your staff collaborate as a cohesive and motivated team. Lessons are lively and interesting. Learning typically builds well on what pupils know, and you have effective arrangements for supporting those who fall behind or who have additional learning needs. The staff team works hard to support pupils who find it difficult to manage their emotions and behaviour. Support for parents to understand and aid their children's learning is good.

Pupils enjoy coming to school, and attendance is in line with the national average. Pupils work hard in lessons, focusing well, listening to adults and cooperating with each other. Rules and expectations for behaviour are consistently applied and

adhered to. The same is true around the school. Older pupils make useful playground helpers and were keen to talk to me about what they do, including making sure that pupils play together sensibly.

Among the reasons why pupils enjoy St Mary's is the breadth of the curriculum on offer. The 'Rotten Romans' was certainly inspiring much interest as a theme, as was the good use of local resources such as the Downland Museum and the beach. References to the city are evident in displays throughout the school, and the pupils gain a good understanding of where they are growing up. The school's Christian character influences the pupils, for example in how they support each other. They have a good understanding of British values such as tolerance and respect for others.

Together with other leaders and the staff, you set about tackling the previous inspection's areas for improvement energetically. You made good progress initially in ensuring that more pupils reached the higher levels and knew how to improve their work. A period of some uncertainty in the last academic year meant that the pace of that work fell back. However, you re-structured the leadership team in September, with two new appointments at assistant headteacher level. Together, you have recovered the momentum of improvement work. You have an accurate view of the school's effectiveness and are under no illusions about what requires attention; you are moving things forward briskly.

Governors are a skilled and effective group, and have excellent links to the local area. They are effective in holding you and your leadership team to account, alongside providing support where required. They ensure that their training is up to date, including on vital areas such as staff recruitment.

Safeguarding is effective.

Pupils are safe and well cared for. As they step off the bustling roads around the school, they know their safety is paramount to the staff. The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. There is a strong culture of vigilance. Pupils said that staff are approachable and an adult will help them if they have any worries. Pupils appreciate the care and concern that staff have for their welfare and well-being. The school goes the extra mile to support families, some of whom noted their gratitude for sensitive support provided in times of trouble. The school makes good use of local agencies too in meeting families' needs.

You ensure that staff receive regular training. They know how to keep children safe from the dangers of abuse, sexual exploitation and radicalisation, including online. Pupils were keen to talk about lessons covering online safety. Safeguarding records are assiduous and of high quality. Noteworthy cases receive the personal attention of you and the chair of governors so that any concerns are identified and addressed quickly.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, I explored the work of leaders and managers, in particular in improving outcomes in reading and raising the levels of support and challenge for the most able pupils and for disadvantaged pupils.
- Having identified that in recent years pupils were making less progress overall in their reading than in other areas, effective work has been completed to adopt a new approach. In the work we saw together, staff were focusing on reading for understanding, building on an analysis showing that this was where pupils made slower gains in the past. You are doing more to engage parents in hearing their children read. Progress is accelerating, and pupils are enjoying their reading more. They take up additional opportunities to read, including outside, for example, where they were keen to read to me at break in the playground.
- Work to ensure that more pupils reach the higher levels has been re-launched this year. Staff are well focused on setting high expectations for all, especially the most able pupils. Pupils have a good understanding of what they need to work on and are keen to do well. In mathematics lessons, pupils said that they understand the areas they are working on more deeply because teachers are good at explaining things. The work is well planned so that learning builds over time. This helps more pupils hit high targets. In writing and reading, pupils do not always understand the ideas covered securely enough before moving on. Teachers' feedback is not always effective in aiding pupils' thinking about what to do next. This is holding some pupils back from reaching the higher standards they are capable of. In lessons, we saw evidence of this, and you and your team identified it is an area that you are working on.
- We looked at the work being done to support disadvantaged pupils. A close focus on these pupils' learning since the last inspection has seen the gaps between their attainment and that of others narrowing. However, last year saw some of those gains lost. A refreshed approach from September, including more effective tracking of pupils' progress and careful work with individual teachers, has recovered any lost ground. These pupils are now making good progress and in some cases out-performing other pupils.
- Developing capacity at leadership level rightly underlies the school improvement plan. You were disappointed with some of the outcomes for Year 6 pupils last year. An above-national-average proportion of pupils reached the expected levels in their reading and writing, but it was only in mathematics that pupils exceeded the expected level. You are clearly ambitious for more pupils to exceed the expected level in reading and writing. Spurred on by this, your reshaping of the leadership team has been impressive. You have clear lines of accountability, but also give staff development a high priority. The observations we carried out in lessons, and the subsequent discussions, showed that you and your colleagues are inquisitive and thoughtful in working out how to improve teaching further. You are well engaged with local teacher training providers and keep a weather eye on ensuring a good supply of dedicated staff into the school. Staff enjoy working at the school and said that it is well led and skilfully managed.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils are enabled to understand the more difficult concepts necessary in order to achieve at greater depth in their reading and writing.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the director of children's services for Brighton and Hove. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Long
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the two assistant headteachers and four governors, including the chair of the governing body. I held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. I met with seven pupils in a formal meeting and talked with pupils at break and lunchtime. I observed learning in seven lessons or part lessons, all jointly with you or an assistant headteacher. I took account of 93 responses from parents to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 44 free text comments. I also took account of the views of eight members of the school team who responded to the online survey for staff. I analysed a range of school documentation including information about pupils' achievement, the school improvement plan and safeguarding checks, policies and procedures. We discussed your own evaluation of the school's effectiveness.