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Ms Maggie Beck
Headteacher
Darwen St James' CofE Primary Academy
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Dear Ms Beck

Short inspection of Darwen St James' CofE Primary Academy

Following my visit to the school on 24 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in December 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Following a period of turbulence in staffing, when the school converted to an academy, you have built a new leadership team that works effectively with all staff to provide a harmonious learning community. Staff are dedicated to meeting the personal needs of pupils and their families, while encouraging pupils to reach their full potential academically.

You and your deputy headteacher have an accurate and reflective view of the school's strengths and priorities. You are determined to improve the school further and have high expectations of what you and your staff can achieve. The chair of the newly formed local governing committee and other governors whom I met are well aware of all aspects of school life and what could be made even better. They bring with them a wide range of skills with which they support and challenge you to drive improvements. The leadership team is aware, for example, of the need to continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning in writing across the curriculum. Leaders have set ambitious targets to increase the proportion of pupils making good and better progress across all subjects. Since the previous inspection, you and your leaders have adjusted the curriculum. This includes a focus on developing religious education and personal, social and health education effectively within topic work. Assemblies, lessons and faith festivals enable pupils to learn and write about other cultures, tolerance and British values. You and your staff provide a varied range of experiences, including out-of-school activities and trips, to further enrich the curriculum and widen pupils' experiences. You ensure that the curriculum broadens

the horizons of pupils, many of whom rely on school activities, events and trips to enjoy experiences beyond their own environment.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to raise attainment further by moving pupils on more quickly with their learning. You dealt with significant changes in staffing from 2013–2015, but this period of turbulence had a negative impact on pupils' progress. However, the provisional results from 2017 show a rapidly improving picture at the end of key stages 1 and 2 compared with 2016. You have introduced a new tracking system, which clearly shows the good progress that pupils make from their starting points. Leaders and teachers are now quick to intervene when progress is not good enough. The new inclusion manager works closely with teaching staff and pastoral managers to ensure that the most appropriate help is provided for individuals. This helps pupils to catch up with their learning. The excellent levels of pastoral care provided by the school ensure that families are well supported and that the welfare and learning needs of pupils are met well. We discussed the very high number of pupils arriving and leaving your school other than at the usual times and the negative impact this has on published data. For example, in 2017, less than one third of the Year 6 cohort of pupils consistently attended the school during key stage 1 and key stage 2. However, at the end of each key stage, you have ensured that progress and attainment has risen each year since the school became an academy.

You were also asked, in the previous inspection report, to improve attendance by seeking further ways to encourage the small minority of parents whose children miss school too often to ensure that their children attend more regularly. You have very effective systems to monitor lateness and absences. In addition, dedicated staff work with families to encourage pupils to attend school regularly. There are now fewer persistent absences, over time. However, some parents still do not fully appreciate the impact of attendance on the progress that pupils make.

Finally, in the previous inspection report, you were asked to enhance the provision in the early years by making the outdoor area more stimulating and using it fully to extend learning across the curriculum. You were successful in gaining funding to develop the outdoor area. Children now choose from a wide range of activities to enhance their learning through a balance of opportunities to explore on their own as well as learning supported by adults. Staff plan activities in the outdoor area effectively, together with the provision in the early years classroom. This has resulted in continued improvement. Over the last three years, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development has increased.

You and your staff continue to ensure that children get off to a good start in the early years. Parents told me how well their children have settled into Nursery and Reception classes and this was evident during the course of the inspection. The vast majority of parents are very happy to have chosen this school saying 'our children are very happy in school... we are so glad that we moved them [from another school]'.

Safeguarding is effective.

In your role as the designated safeguarding leader, and together with your two deputy designated safeguarding leaders, you work tirelessly to ensure that all safeguarding arrangements meet requirements. You make sure that staff fully understand their duty and follow systems and procedures for logging concerns. Together with the office manager, you ensure that all necessary checks are made on the suitability of staff to work with children. When I arrived at the start of the inspection, it was clear for me to see the effectiveness of procedures to check on those visiting school.

You ensure that the promotion of safeguarding throughout the school has a very high profile. You provide staff with training that is up to date so that they and members of the local governing committee understand the current guidance. You and the deputy designated safeguarding leaders are prompt in making referrals to the local authority. Together, you rigorously follow up all concerns raised by staff and make sure that pupils are kept safe from potential harm. You work with a wide range of external agencies to provide expertise to support pupils' welfare, as and when necessary. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of a high quality.

Inspection findings

- The first line of enquiry that I explored during this inspection was how effectively writing is being taught across key stages 1 and 2. This was a weaker area in 2017 data. You and your new leadership team have introduced effective systems for the checking of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment of writing. Middle leaders showed me how focused lesson observations and checking on the progress that pupils are making in their books are driving improvements in pupils' progress. You introduced a new curriculum which is now much more engaging for boys. It inspires them to use their imaginations when they are writing. Teaching in Year 2 was effective. The teacher worked well with the whole class in putting a sentence together. Then, with their talk partners, the teacher encouraged the pupils to discuss the different ways in which the sentence could be improved. This provided a structure from which pupils could then embark on their individual pieces of writing. By the end of the lesson, pupils had made good progress in writing their own diary entry. When pupils are unsure about the spelling of particular words, they effectively use their phonics skills to write these words. Teachers plan activities for the wide range of pupils' abilities and pupils' work in books shows good progress.
- Leaders provide a range of opportunities, through trips and visits beyond school, to bring learning to life and stimulate pupils' imaginations. For example, the teacher in Year 6 used the recent residential trip to an outdoor activity centre for pupils to draw upon their experiences. Writing about their experiences, for example when kayaking for the first time in their lives, ensured that pupils were able to write in detail and at length, making good progress. You have introduced a range of topics which stimulate both girls and boys alike. In my meeting with pupils, they told me how much they enjoy learning through topics and this

provides opportunities beyond English lessons to develop their writing skills. However, it was evident from pupils' topic books that teachers' expectations of the quality and quantity of pupils' writing is not always high enough across the curriculum.

- The second line of enquiry was to check on the quality of the teaching of phonics. The proportion of Year 1 children achieving the required standard in the phonics check in 2017 and in 2016 was slightly lower than the national average but was a significant improvement on results in 2015. It was important to check whether or not the teaching of phonics was effective to drive further improvement. You have made adjustments to the teaching of phonics and provided appropriate training for teachers and teaching assistants who are skilled in teaching phonics. Pupils are highly engaged and make good progress from starting points that are below those skills typical for their age. In Year 1, pupils accurately blended letters and their sounds to work out 'say', 'play', 'wait' and 'afraid' before putting the words into sentences. Pupils in Year 2 apply their knowledge of phonics with confidence to work out unfamiliar words like 'hive', 'turtle' and 'skeleton'. This demonstrates the effectiveness of teaching phonics.
- Next, I considered the breadth of the curriculum and to what extent it provides opportunities to develop skills as well as raising pupils' aspirations. Leaders have developed a new curriculum that is broad and balanced. Teachers ensure that history, geography and other subjects are embedded into topic work and this provides a curriculum that adds interest to learning. In my meeting with pupils, boys talked animatedly about topic work on modern Mexico, ancient Egypt and the battle of Hastings. This demonstrates how well the topics are capturing the imagination of boys and girls alike. Teachers encourage them to find out information for themselves using books and technology and this is developing their reading skills. However, teachers are not always consistent in the standard of writing expected across the curriculum compared to that in English books.
- Finally, I explored what leaders are doing to address the persistent absence of groups of pupils. I was concerned about the number of pupils who had been persistently absent last year. You provided me with evidence to demonstrate how well you and members of the local governing committee have continued to take action to improve attendance. Your parental support workers follow up in detail those pupils who are late, occasionally absent and persistently absent. They have solid evidence of success stories. However, some parents still do not always help their children to attend regularly enough. You closely monitor the high level of mobility in and out of your school and your progress data shows that often when pupils return to school after a period of absence their numeracy and literacy skills have declined. Your extensive work with other agencies and the local authority is of a high calibre. This term, you are thoroughly tracking 50 pupils but already nine are now no longer on role and recorded as children missing from the education system.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers have consistently high expectations of the standards pupils can achieve in writing across the curriculum
- you, your staff and external agencies continue to work with families whose children's progress is interrupted by too many absences.

I am copying this letter to the executive board, the director of education for the Diocese of Blackburn, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Blackburn with Darwen. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Naomi Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I observed teaching and learning across the school alongside the headteacher. I listened to pupils read in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2. Also, I scrutinised a range of pupils' work. I held meetings with senior leaders, middle leaders, members of the local governing committee, the designated safeguarding leader and the deputy designated safeguarding leaders. There were not enough responses to generate a report for Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, but six free-text responses from parents were considered. I reviewed the four staff questionnaire responses and the one response from the Ofsted pupil survey. I spoke informally with parents at the school gates to seek their views and I also spoke with pupils. During the inspection, I reviewed a range of school documents. These included: the school's development plans and self-evaluation documents; minutes of the governing body meetings; safeguarding documentation; and various records relating to pupils' behaviour and attendance.