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Mrs Val Hall
Headteacher
St Mark's Elm Tree CofE Voluntary Aided Primary School
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Stockton-on-Tees
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Dear Mrs Hall

Short inspection of St Mark's Elm Tree CofE Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 27 June 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 February 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Levels of attainment at the end of key stage 2 have been consistently above those seen nationally, reflecting the good progress pupils make across a broad range of subjects. Your astute leadership has ensured that the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection have been addressed. Pupils made better progress in writing and attained standards above the national average in 2015 and 2016. However, you and your ambitious leadership team accurately pinpointed where further improvements could be made. Changes made this year have resulted in further gains. In particular, children now develop early writing skills more securely in the Nursery and Reception classes and build more convincingly on this strong start when they move into key stage 1. Furthermore, the good recruitment, induction and training provided for new teachers has ensured greater consistency of practice across each phase of the school. Expectations are high and staff are motivated by the potential benefits of the imminent change to academy status.

You and the governors gave the school's future considerable thought before taking the decision to become an academy. The decision reflects the rapid increase in the size of the school and your continuing commitment to meeting the needs of the whole community. In forming a multi-academy trust with Pentland Primary School, you firmly believe that you can strengthen the quality of provision further and learn

from one another. Although the process of converting to an academy has been time-consuming, you have not allowed it to be a distraction. You are well supported by a skilled and capable wider leadership team which has collectively ensured that the quality of education and the care pupils receive has been sustained and improved.

You acted decisively last year to strengthen the leadership of the early years, as outcomes at the end of the Reception Year had been no better than average. The resulting improvements in the quality of provision have been recognised by parents. Better outcomes for children have quickly been secured. Effective middle leadership in key stage 1 has also secured more rapid progress for pupils currently in the school. The most recent assessments show a sharp increase in the proportion of pupils reaching the higher level in reading, writing and mathematics. However, you have recognised that you need more leadership capacity in place to secure consistently rapid progress right across key stage 2. As a result, you have amended your staffing structure and made a new appointment to lead Years 3 and 4 from September.

The level of overall attendance slipped below the national average last year. In particular, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils fell well below that of other pupils nationally. The punctuality of some families was also a concern. In response, members of staff have made concerted efforts to challenge those families who were continually late for school and punctuality has improved. The appointment of the pupil welfare officer has ensured that more is being done to engage with those families where levels of attendance are weaker. Overall attendance has improved this year, although these improvements are only marginal for disadvantaged pupils and remain a priority for improvement.

Safeguarding is effective.

You make sure that your policies and procedures are fully up to date, and that all members of staff are trained in line with the most recent government guidance. You have very secure systems in place to check all adults who work in or visit the school, including building contractors currently working on the school site. Governors liaise closely with the local authority and other agencies to ensure that the school site meets necessary health and safety requirements as it undergoes development.

You have developed a strong team of knowledgeable and well-trained staff to manage safeguarding and child protection work. The team has good procedures in place to share and review the information you hold on vulnerable pupils. Good records are maintained which show that you take timely action to protect children when concerns arise. Your curriculum is regularly adapted to ensure that pupils are well informed about how to protect themselves. The curriculum also has strong elements that develop pupils' understanding of equalities and the rights of the individual. As a result, there are very few incidents of bullying or prejudicial behaviour in the school.

Inspection findings

- You have continued to lead the school with energy and ambition. You are very knowledgeable about all the pupils in the school and demonstrate a strong commitment to meeting the needs of every child. Your accurate and honest self-evaluation means that you know what needs to improve and you are quick to take the necessary actions. Together with the active governing body, you are skilfully leading the school into the next phase of its development.
- Teachers plan their lessons carefully, and skilfully adapt the learning activities they set for pupils with different starting points. This ensures that the most able pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are suitably challenged and make good progress. Teaching assistants and other adults are deployed skilfully to ensure that there is always an adult on hand who can support the learning. Pupils work purposefully and productively. Pupils say that teachers are good at 'making their expectations clear' and that their feedback helps them to improve their work.
- In the early years, strong leadership and a deep understanding of child development has improved the curriculum. Play activities are more skilfully designed to develop children's motor skills and stimulate their curiosity in mark-making. This is carefully fostered and developed into writing skills that are taught more formally to those children who are ready for more. The skilled teaching of phonics from the Nursery Year onwards is also contributing to more rapid development of reading skills. Staff also provide excellent workshops for parents that are helping to strengthen the partnership between school and home. Children have responded positively to new and more challenging expectations. Outcomes at the end of the Reception Year have improved this year, with over three quarters of children attaining the expected standard in reading and writing.
- Most pupils make at least expected progress across key stage 1. However, some pupils, particularly the most able, have not always made the progress they should. Leaders have focused successfully on improving this area this year. The school's final assessments this year show considerable improvements in the proportion of pupils reaching the higher standard in reading and mathematics. While improvements in writing are less clear, the school's assessments also show that the proportion of pupils reaching the higher standard in writing is now matching that seen nationally.
- Pupils read regularly to adults. Most read with fluency and expression. Those pupils who fell short of the expected standard in the Year 1 national phonics screening check last year have all attained the standard when retested this year.
- Overall progress is good across key stage 2, although there is some variability in rates of progress across classes and subjects. Challenging teaching ensures that the most able pupils make significantly more progress than seen nationally in reading and mathematics. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and disadvantaged pupils all make strong progress over time and leave the school with levels of attainment that are consistently above the national average.

- Pupils who join the school mid-year, and those who are placed in the additional resourced provision, make good progress. Their specific needs are quickly assessed and teachers adeptly prepare carefully tailored materials to help address gaps in their knowledge. Additional teaching assistants, student teachers and volunteers are thoughtfully deployed to ensure that a high level of support is available to help these pupils settle quickly, feel secure and to re-engage with learning.
- The governing body is very active and involved in the life of the school. It skilfully balances its long-term strategic responsibilities with day-to-day monitoring of performance. Governors' frequent visits, and the thorough scrutiny of reports they receive, ensure that all members of the governing body have a detailed awareness of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Consequently, they hold leaders tightly to account. Records of their meetings show that they routinely analyse and ask probing questions about the progress made by each class. Governors assiduously fulfil their individual responsibilities for areas such as the use of the pupil premium, safeguarding, and health and safety.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- middle leadership capacity is successfully enhanced in order to strengthen checks on the quality of teaching and pupils' progress in lower key stage 2
- the overall level of attendance improves further, especially the attendance of disadvantaged pupils, so that it compares favourably with the national average.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the diocese of Durham and the director of children's services for Stockton-on-Tees. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection I met with you, the pupil welfare officer, the early years leader, a representative of the local authority and seven governors, including the chair of the governing body. We visited lessons together across all phases of the school to look at the impact of work to develop the quality of teaching. I listened to some pupils read and looked in detail at some pupils' books with the key stage 1 leader. I met with a group of parents and looked at the 19 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View) and the eight responses to the staff survey. I looked at a range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning, policies and other information available on the school

website. I focused particularly on the progress children are making in the early years and key stage 1, the progress being made by pupils who transfer during the year from other schools and the impact of efforts to improve attendance and punctuality.