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Mrs Clare Sturmey
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Dear Mrs Sturmey

Short inspection of Grace Mary Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 20 March 2018, 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 July 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in certain areas. This may indicate that the school is improving towards being outstanding. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

Grace Mary is a positive and inclusive school community. You, the governors and staff team are very committed to the school's core values and clearly reflect its motto, 'Learning and growing together, hand in hand'. Leaders and staff make a strong contribution to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Pupils also learn about British values and important characteristics such as tolerance, democracy and respect for each other's views, beliefs and values. You and the senior leadership team provide strong and effective leadership and set high expectations of pupils and staff. The intelligent recruitment of key leaders and staff since the previous inspection has further strengthened the teaching. The welfare, care and attention given to pupils, including those pupils in the focused provision who have autism and special educational needs (SEN), are exemplary.

As you know, I shared with you some key lines of enquiry. Most of these were to determine how well you and the staff team are maintaining the positive outcomes from previous national test results. Both current and previous assessments of pupils' achievement indicate that they do exceptionally well in relation to their starting

points when they join the school. You have clearly addressed both areas for improvement cited at the time of the previous inspection. Both teaching and pupil outcomes have improved markedly since then. Last year's national assessments, for example, show that in all key stages, early years, key stage 1 and key stage 2, most pupils made at least good rates of progress. More impressively, the progress made by pupils by the end of Year 6 in the 2017 national tests in reading, writing and mathematics placed their achievement in the top 20% of schools nationally.

The teaching and support provided for pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities is highly effective. Management and oversight of SEN provision by the two coordinators is strong and effective. They track and monitor diligently the interventions and support that pupils receive to ensure that they all make at least good progress towards their learning and behaviour targets. As stated earlier, there have been significant improvements to teaching, including that seen across the early years since the previous inspection. There is still scope to build on this even more. As we discussed during our lesson visits, some sessions were punctuated or interrupted by staff asking too many questions. This slowed pupils' progress. The best teaching we observed and saw reflected in pupils' work in books maintains good pace. The strongest teaching allows pupils time to work and less time to sit passively while adults posed questions or engaged in too much whole-class conversation.

It is common practice for teachers to check pupils' work in books. I could see that pupils' independent writing has improved very well since the previous inspection, which was one of the areas for improvement at that time. Pupils' writing and mathematics work have improved very well and this is reflected in national assessment results. The most able pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, also achieve well, as I can see from assessments that a significant proportion achieve in greater depth in reading, writing and mathematics. There is scope now to build on the best practice that exists in many classes to ensure that teachers and support staff regularly check to identify gaps or misunderstandings in pupils' learning.

Governance has also built on previous strengths. The governing body is both supportive and challenging in holding leaders and staff to account for pupils' progress and teachers' performance. Senior leaders and governors identify the right priorities for sustained improvement. This too was an aspect of the school's work that I wanted to explore with you. I found that senior leaders and governors carry out regular checks with staff and these assessments provide a strong basis for identifying the school's strengths and the areas you all wish to improve further. The school development plan sets out ambitious aims and objectives, which are based on accurate evaluations of teaching and pupil outcomes.

Leaders and staff always put pupils first when planning improvements. Pupils and parents appreciate this and many parents I spoke with paid tribute to the staff team for the contribution that the staff make to pupils' education and welfare. You also have a highly skilled team of learning support assistants who make a significant contribution to pupils' academic and personal development.

Pupils are enthusiastic, very well behaved and enjoy their education and the company of their classmates. Many told me that they love coming to school, as one group confirmed, 'We learn a lot and our teachers make it fun.' If you recall, during our visits to lessons, we saw that in most lessons pupils happily engaged with us to explain their work and progress. I was particularly impressed by the quality, form and structure of pupils' writing. We focused on the achievement of pupils in the early years and key stage 1 for part of the inspection day. Children in the early years are achieving well and settle into school routines quickly. However, I agree with you and external reviews of the early years, that some early years children have the potential to work more independently. Too much adult direction leaves less scope for the children to show their learning, demonstrate initiative and learn from mistakes when given opportunities to choose activities for themselves.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding across the school. Safeguarding procedures are fit for purpose. Staff vetting and checking systems are rigorous. All the parents I spoke with agree that pupils are safe in school and are very well cared for by the staff. Senior leaders, staff and those with specific responsibility for managing safeguarding procedures keep robust records if and when any concerns are raised about pupils' well-being and safety.

You and the staff adopt both a caring and robust approach to follow up absenteeism in order to make sure that pupils are safe when not in school. This too was a key line of enquiry because of last year's high rate of persistent absenteeism. I met with leaders and the member of staff responsible for liaising with the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach families. As you know, I judged that you and the staff keep robust records and follow up any absenteeism by visiting families at home. This is helping to encourage the small number of families to send their children to school regularly and on time.

You and your staff treat pupils and families with dignity and respect. Combined with a very effective nurture programme that fosters strong relationships with pupils and families, you are increasingly successful in improving attendance and punctuality. This work must continue in order to reduce still further persistent absenteeism rates. There are well-defined and clear referral procedures so that teaching, support, administrative and ancillary staff are aware of whom to go to if they are concerned about a child's welfare or safety.

Inspection findings

- Children in the early years are thriving and the proportion reaching a good level of development is in line with the national average. This represents strong progress in relation to their low starting points when they joined in the Nursery and Reception class. The children are happy and settle very well into school routines, but should have more opportunities to choose activities and learn through trial and error independently.

- Pupils in Years 1 and 2 achieve very well and there is particularly consistent and strong teaching in the Year 2. The previous two years' national assessments in key stage 1 show that the large majority of pupils reach or exceed age-related standards in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Year 2. The percentage of pupils in Year 2 last year reaching or exceeding age-related standards was above the national average. For the fourth consecutive year, the results of the key stage 1 phonics screening test show improvement. These outcomes across key stage 1 represent rapid progress in the way that pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 learn basic reading, writing and mathematics skills, as well as phonics and a love of reading.
- In key stage 2, test results show that pupils make at least good progress in all classes and some exceptional teaching by the end of the key stage accelerates this further. This balance of good and outstanding teaching enables the large majority to reach or exceed age-related standards in English and mathematics. Some of the teaching has the potential to improve further and replicate other strong practice. For example, teachers and support staff plan work well but do not ask focused questions that help identify any gaps or misunderstanding in pupils' learning. There are occasions when staff ask too many questions, leaving less time for pupils to work or demonstrate what they have learned.
- I checked whether there was any significant difference between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and others. A large proportion of pupils across the school are disadvantaged and the outcomes from national tests also show that they achieve as well as other pupils nationally.
- Pupils who have autism in the focused provision and have education, care and health plans are very well taught and cared for by a skilled team of support staff and teachers.
- Across the school, pupils' writing improves very well. Pupils' work in books is well presented and as pupils move up the school from the early years through key stages 1 and 2, handwriting, spelling and punctuation improves. The work produced by the group of pupils I met with was detailed, accurate and reflects teachers' high expectations.
- The deputy headteacher is leading mathematics very well. Assessment outcomes show significant and sustained improvement to pupils' achievement in mathematics. The current focus on developing reasoning, mastery and learning in greater depth is proving to be effective. By the end of key stage 2, the most able pupils are mastering complex calculations and demonstrate a secure understanding of shapes, measures and fractions.
- Leaders and staff are very good at engaging with parents and carers. Regular workshops and special events aimed at involving parents in their children's learning contributes to supporting learning at home. This needs to continue and expand so that it engages the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families even more, as well as reducing further persistent absenteeism.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue focusing on improving teaching further in all classes by:
 - building on and sharing the best practice that exists in many classes, making sure, for example, that teachers and support staff ask questions and check to identify what pupils know and understand, as well as assessing any gaps or misunderstandings in pupils' learning
 - providing more opportunities for children in the early years to work independently, to show initiative and make their own choices when there is a balance of activities directed by adults and those for children to choose, and allowing more scope for children to learn from their mistakes when choosing their own activities
- build on the work being done with vulnerable and disadvantaged families to reduce persistent absenteeism. In addition, leaders and staff should continue focusing on helping parents and carers support pupils' learning at home.

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

Yours sincerely

Charalambos Loizou
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you, the deputy headteacher, two assistant headteachers and four governors, including the chair of the governing body. I also had meetings with a school improvement adviser from Sandwell local authority, two members of staff responsible for managing special educational needs provision and staff who have responsibility for the oversight of safeguarding and liaison with families.

You and I visited every class together to observe some teaching. We looked at pupils' work in books and spoke to pupils during lessons. I also spoke to a group of pupils in the afternoon and they kindly shared with me their work, progress and views about the school. I spoke to some parents at the start of the school day and considered the results of the school's surveys of parents' views. There were too few responses to analyse from the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View.

I scrutinised the school's development plan and priorities, and discussed with you and senior leaders how you monitor and check the quality and effectiveness of teaching across the school. You shared with me leaders' own evaluations of the school's work and the most recent assessments of pupils' attainment and progress. We also discussed the national test results and assessments undertaken by pupils in 2016 and 2017. I checked staff vetting and safeguarding procedures to determine whether the school's arrangements for safeguarding are effective.