

25 January 2022

Dear Parent/Carer

Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education are currently carrying out visits to some schools and early learning and childcare settings across Scotland. When we wrote to you after the last inspection of St Thomas RC Primary School and Nursery Class, we said that we would engage with the school to report on progress. We recently engaged in discussion with staff and the local authority and carried out a visit to the school. Our engagement helped us learn more about how children and their families have been supported through the COVID-19 pandemic. We also heard about approaches that have been working well to support children's health and wellbeing, learning and progress. We discussed with the headteacher and local authority officer, the school's progress in taking forward the recommendations from our original inspection. Since the last inspection, there have been several changes to staffing. We did not visit the nursery, as it is no longer managed by the headteacher, despite being still located within the school premises. The nursery is now led and managed by Moray Council's Early Years Service.

This letter sets out what we found during our visit.

Supporting children, young people and families through COVID-19

School staff reported that local authority officers have been helpful in supporting them since the first period of remote learning. The school initiated links with partners and external organisations to support families, children's health and wellbeing and take forward their learning during COVID-19 challenges. The headteacher, together with staff, prioritised a focus on the health and wellbeing of all, but also focused on children's progress in other areas including literacy and numeracy. The positive relationships which existed already within the school and its community have been enhanced through COVID-19. Staff, children and families worked well together to overcome challenges which arose during periods of remote learning. The school was unable to participate and lead church community activities as normal, however, faith continued to underpin the school's values throughout the pandemic.

When children were unable to attend school during periods of remote learning, teachers continued to work hard to help parents whose children were learning at home. They used digital technology and delivered paper learning packs to children's homes. Where possible, children with no access to digital technology were given school devices. This helped increase children's uptake of online learning. The Moray Council officers helped staff deliver online learning through useful training. Staff assisted each other and shared knowledge and expertise, including how to set up a virtual classroom. Staff also supported each other's health and wellbeing in various ways, including through social media, phone calls and virtual catch-ups when needed.

Staff engaged well with parents to support children's learning at home. This enabled staff to continue to take forward children's learning and work with them to address any concerns and anxieties as they arose. During periods of remote learning, staff set up regular checks to monitor attendance and engagement. The headteacher and all teaching staff phoned parents regularly to support them and their children. Parents, whose children were at the early school

stages, were contacted via emails and phone calls to support the remote learning packages and clarify concerns around new learning.

Staff shared relevant information with parents on what children's learning would look like during periods of remote learning. This included a suggested outline of activities to be covered each day and over the course of the week. Over half of children on the school roll attended the school hub, which increased significantly the in-school contact of children. The hub was led by teachers who were also providing remote learning for all groups of learners.

When children returned to school, staff were pleased that children settled back into a learning routine quickly. Children followed agreed practices on keeping safe and how to behave in school and in the playground. As well as ensuring a key focus on children's health and wellbeing, staff continued to address important life skills including improving children's skills in numeracy and literacy. Children liked being back at school and enjoyed taking part in a range of curricular experiences, including music and outdoor learning. Staff had established important baseline measures which helped them identify easily any gaps in children's learning. They used this information to implement key interventions, which quickly helped them to take action and plan work to address need. An extra teacher has also been employed using additional funding to help children who needed it to support their learning as a result of COVID-19.

Progress with recommendations from previous inspection

Since the inspection, the headteacher has continued to provide strong leadership and direction in supporting school improvements. She has been well supported by the local authority officer. Together with staff, the headteacher has addressed those aspects which needed to improve. Staff, children, parents, partners and others within the local community engage well with the school, which has enhanced children's learning experiences. The school's vision, values and aims now reflect its unique context. Staff have improved significantly the quality of their teaching and work well as one school team. Children have more ownership of their learning. They use initiative, make choices and decisions, and are less reliant on adults. Staff have enhanced children's curricular experiences. As a result, children are developing better skills and knowledge in a range of areas, including social subjects, science, technology, music, literacy and numeracy. Staff use the local environment more often to broaden children's learning, encouraging them to apply skills and knowledge in various contexts. The headteacher recognises that children would also benefit from further, varied experiences for them to practice skills for learning, life and work.

Staff have responded well to taking on various lead roles, for example in play pedagogy, literacy, numeracy, digital skills and support for learning. Children now take more responsibility and have lead roles on various school groups and committees, including the sustainability squad and the school improvement group. Children know their rights as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In particular, they enjoy sessions on a Friday where they develop new and different skills with other children under Article 31: The right to have fun in the way they want to. Children are motivated to learn. They have a greater respect for each other and adults. Their needs are being better met. They have a better understanding of what they are learning and why. Teachers have improved the pace of lessons and staff provide learning at the right level of difficulty for children. Staff's use of the Moray Council standard for learning and teaching has enabled

children to experience greater consistency as they move from stage to stage. All of this work is having a positive impact on enabling children to make more appropriate progress in line with their own stage of development and expected Curriculum for Excellence level.

Since the inspection, the headteacher and staff have developed a number of clear tracking systems. Staff have used these well since children returned to in-school learning to help them support children's needs. Staff used baseline assessments to find out where children were at in their learning and implement interventions. These interventions have had a positive impact on children's progress and attainment, including those who have additional support needs. As a result of improved learning and teaching, well-judged interventions and focused staff development, children are now making better progress in literacy and numeracy. In particular, children's skills in listening, talking, reading and mathematics are better. Children enjoy and are motivated to read with 'Max' the helpful dog who visits the school on a regular basis. This strategy encourages those children to continue to improve their reading. Children's attainment in writing has also improved. Staff recognise that they need to continue to build on this improvement. They have appropriate plans in place to address gaps. Overall, parents are pleased with the improvements to their children's learning which they have noticed since the inspection.

What happens next?

Understandably, the school has been responding to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, staff have worked hard and been effective in implementing plans to support recovery. Under the clear leadership and direction of the headteacher, staff have addressed successfully the recommendations from the original inspection. As a result, we will make no more visits to the school in connection with the original inspection. The Moray Council will continue to provide information to parents about the school's progress as part of its usual arrangements for reporting on the quality of its education service.

Moirra Allan
HM Senior Inspector