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18 July 2019

Miss Diggle
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Dear Miss Diggle

Short inspection of Birtley East Community Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 10 July 2019, 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 April 2015.

This school continues to be good.

Senior leaders have maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have improved the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that it is more consistent in every class. You have put together a professional and united staff and strengthened leadership at every level. All of your staff agree that they enjoy working at the school and that it is led and managed well. Staff morale is high and everyone is committed to your plans for continued improvement.

Your strategic approach to improving the school is very effective. Senior leaders monitor all aspects of your provision closely to ensure that any weaknesses are tackled swiftly so as not to hinder pupils' learning. Your recent strategy of training all of the staff team collectively has been most successful. It has encouraged your staff to discuss and reflect on the process of teaching to find the best methods that work for your pupils. Staff share their good practice readily and are keen to learn from each other. Both teachers and teaching assistants agree that leaders provide impressive support for any changes, new ideas or developments introduced.

The experienced and skilful governing body provide sterling support and helpful challenge. They ask many purposeful questions to find out more about how the school operates, checking on its efficiency and ensuring that funding provides good value for money. For example, governors recently looked at evidence from lessons, books and pupil interviews to find out more about your new English curriculum. They considered staff views too before assessing that funding was having a strong impact on pupils' progress and enjoyment in English. Governors use funding wisely

to extend pupils' knowledge and skills across the whole curriculum. This includes a strong investment in pupils' emotional well-being, health and personal development. Governors supported senior leaders to redevelop the impressive school grounds, providing a nurturing outdoor play area that caters admirably for every pupil's needs, interests and abilities. As a result, pupils say that behaviour has greatly improved.

A large majority of parents praise the school. They say that staff are helpful and dedicated, keen to provide individual support for pupils and the wider family, especially with pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or challenging circumstances at home. As one parent explained, 'Children love attending school and are thriving in a supportive learning environment.'

At the time of the last inspection, inspectors asked leaders to improve the quality of teaching in Year 3 and 4 so that work challenged pupils and increased attainment. Leaders tackled this successfully with a whole-school approach to training and frequent checks on pupils' progress. Now, high-quality teaching is consistent in every year group.

Inspectors asked leaders to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in school. Governors use pupil premium funding prudently to support disadvantaged pupils. They understand the varied and complex nature of pupils' needs in school and at home. They ensure that funding addresses any barriers to learning for the large number of disadvantaged pupils in school, including a strong focus on pupils' emotional well-being and better attendance. As a result of this, the attainment of disadvantaged pupils has increased over time, especially in mathematics, where this group of pupils are in the top 10% of schools nationally.

In your previous inspection report, inspectors asked leaders to improve the attendance of a small number of pupils who were frequently absent. You have worked relentlessly to improve pupils' attendance so that overall it is now in line with the national average. You use many strategies to engage parents in their pupils' learning so that they understand the vital importance of their children's regular attendance at school. You employ specialist staff to support families in need and work with many other professionals to help parents and pupils who have difficulties at home that prevent regular attendance. While persistent absence remains high for a small number of pupils, your records show impressive recent improvements in the attendance of several of these pupils. You now have the staffing, strategies and support in place to build on this good progress.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team makes sure that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and effective. You place safeguarding at the centre of the school's work, prioritising pupils' physical and mental health while they are in your care. Staff and governors receive regular training and understand how to apply this adeptly within school. They all know what to do if they spot a concern or have concerns reported to them.

Records show that you respond swiftly to any worries about pupils' safeguarding. The recent appointment of a family support worker strengthened your safeguarding further. This member of staff works closely with teachers and wider agencies to keep pupils safe, helping families in need and supporting them to provide the best they can for their children. This new role in school is already paying dividends by reducing the persistent absence of a small number of pupils who face some challenging circumstances at home.

Governors take their safeguarding role seriously. The appointment of new governors with specific skills and experience in keeping pupils safe mean that safeguarding checks are more frequent and in-depth. Governors keep a close eye on the school's recruitment records to confirm that all staff have the correct qualifications and background checks. Governors are very knowledgeable about up-to-date safeguarding procedures and use their training wisely to support, advise and question leaders about how best to keep pupils safe in school and beyond.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, I wanted to see if reading and writing were improving. In recent years, the attainment of some groups of pupils was not as strong in English as in mathematics. I was particularly interested to know if the outcomes of different groups of pupils, especially disadvantaged pupils and boys, were improving in reading and writing. I was also keen to find out whether provision for pupils with SEND was helping this group of pupils to make sufficient progress in English. Reading and writing are improving because pupils regularly read and write across the curriculum. They have many opportunities to develop their skills in the classroom, at after-school clubs and outside in your new outdoor play and learning area. Over the past two years, you have prioritised reading and writing improvements across school. Each class theme focuses around a class book or novel that the teacher reads to the class. Pupils become engrossed in the stories and, consequently, learning in other subjects ignites. Your classroom environments include cosy corners now, where pupils can enjoy books together, nurturing a love of books from their very first days in school.
- You have overhauled your approach to guided reading so that staff listen carefully to pupils read and then extend comprehension skills well. You have trained staff to ask delving questions that assess how much pupils fully understand about texts. Pupils enjoy these sessions, engaging in animated discussions about characters and events in their texts. Despite your strong commitment to improving outcomes in reading and writing, fewer pupils reach higher standards in this subject compared to other schools nationally. This is because activities do not always give enough opportunity for your middle-attainers to work at greater depth in reading and writing. Your school development plan addresses this accurately.
- In the early years, children get off to a flying start with their reading because Nursery staff are skilled at teaching phonics effectively. They use many resources to teach children how to hear and say the correct sounds for different letters of the alphabet. They bring this learning to life with puppets, props, songs and rhymes. Children have lots of fun as they learn to read so their skills develop

quickly. By the end of Nursery, some of your most-able children can already match the correct sounds to most letters of the alphabet and can read short, simple words. You recently altered your phonics planning to make it more systematic in early years and key stage 1. Planning now shows how phonics skills link in with spelling at key stage 2 more clearly. While observing in classrooms, I could see evidence that your changes have improved teaching in this area and they are supporting pupils' progress. However, they have not yet had time to have an impact on pupils' scores in the Year 1 phonics screening check. Results in this assessment show that pupils' phonic skills remain below national expectations.

- You have a high proportion of pupils with SEND compared to other schools across the country. Although some pupils who have special educational needs do not always meet age-related expectations, they do make good progress from their different starting points. Staff work with patience and determination to support pupils who have speech and language difficulties. Teaching assistants and teachers demonstrate clearly how to pronounce each letter sound and give advice to pupils that helps them blend the sounds together. Staff and pupils alike are excited when progress is made and they celebrate new accomplishments together. Sometimes, a small number of pupils struggle to read their reading scheme books when they practise their skills in lessons and with staff. At times, they are given books to read that contain letter sounds they have not been taught. Consequently, they do not have the previous knowledge that would allow them to work out what these words say. This slows down their fluency and prevents them from fully understanding the text.
- During the inspection, I was interested to find out if mathematics was improving for boys, disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. Pupils' attainment in mathematics has been higher than in other subjects for several years. The strengths in this subject are your teachers' strong subject knowledge and the way they build up pupils' skills methodically step by step. I observed this in a Year 3 class where staff expertly linked pupils' previous learning to the new tasks set. Pupils could recall the information and vocabulary about graphs they had learned in earlier year groups and this instant yet simple recap of prior knowledge helped them move swiftly on to new challenges.
- Pupils' mathematics books show that they enjoy this subject, show resilience when it is difficult and take a pride in their work. A particular strength is the way that staff challenge pupils to explain their mathematical thinking and to set out their methods clearly. Pupils' explanations, given verbally and in writing, show how they manipulate their knowledge and why they choose specific strategies to solve problems. They enjoy explaining their mathematical ideas to their teachers and peers. The mathematics books I looked at show that all groups of pupils have made good progress this year, as your assessments suggest.
- Recently, leaders identified an unexpected weakness in pupils' mental calculation skills, with pupils' speed and fluency not as strong as expected. You intervened swiftly to take action. Your mathematics leader produced a comprehensive calculations guide and detailed plans to help staff improve pupils' mental calculation skills more quickly and consistently across the whole school. In the lessons observed and in mathematics books I could see that this plan has already

increased the speed and quality of pupils' work in this subject. Pupils achieve good results in mathematics and the number of pupils who work at age-related expectations is higher than other schools nationally. A large proportion of disadvantaged pupils in particular achieve the age-related expectations in mathematics. However, fewer pupils achieve the higher standards in mathematics compared to other schools.

- Previously, the proportion of pupils excluded for a fixed period was higher than usual for a school of your size and context. During the inspection, I was keen to find out if you had reduced behaviour incidents so that exclusions were not quite so high. Your records show that there have not been any fixed-period exclusions for the past three years. This is because you have worked very closely with pupils and their families to ensure that everyone knows the school's expectations for behaviour. Staff support pupils at an individual level to help them overcome any behaviour issues, working with other professionals whenever this is needed. Leaders keep detailed records of incidents and accidents and analyse this information to make continual improvements to pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare. You have created a calm and purposeful atmosphere indoors and out, where all pupils feel welcomed and respected. You have used all of your resources wisely to build a friendly and cohesive school where pupils enjoy learning, make good progress and concentrate well.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue with their plans to improve teaching even further in writing and mathematics so that more pupils achieve higher standards and greater depth in their learning
- they support staff to ensure that books used for reading practice match more closely to the letters and sounds pupils have already been taught in their phonics lessons, especially for those pupils who find decoding texts difficult.

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

Yours sincerely

Sylvia Humble
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I observed lessons in each key stage and you joined me for some of these. Senior and middle leaders showed me pupils' English and mathematics books and we scrutinised these together. I met with your family

support worker, the vice-chair and five members of the governing body and your school's local authority achievement partner.

Various documents were evaluated, including the school improvement plan, the school's self-evaluation document, curriculum planning and the minutes of governing body meetings. I reviewed the school's central record of staffing and recruitment with your safeguarding governor and looked at a range of monitoring documents produced by middle and senior leaders and other governors during their own reviews of learning and other checks. I spoke to pupils about their work during lessons and spoke to other pupils of different ages at playtime. I listened to several pupils read and checked their reading records and other assessments completed by staff. I reviewed safeguarding documents and behaviour logs and we discussed these in our meetings. I checked to make sure that the school meets all the legal equality duties, especially for those pupils with SEND.

We looked at and considered the responses to Parent View, Ofsted's questionnaire from 38 parents. I also considered 17 responses to Ofsted's staff survey. I spoke to several parents at the end of the school day and considered the views of a small number of parents that were sent to me in letters and emails.