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Mr Andrew Ruffell
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ruffell

Short inspection of Fairfield 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 November 2011.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Since your appointment as headteacher in September 2016, you have set about securing improvement with quiet determination. In your previous role as deputy headteacher, you had already gained the trust and respect of the staff and pupils and this continues to be a strong feature. Parents are also fulsome in their praise for the school and the high-quality communication between home and school.

You and your effective leaders have accurately identified the strengths of the school. Leaders are unflinching in evaluating what needs to improve. For example, leaders identified that pupils' writing skills were not as strong as their reading and mathematical skills. You and your team took immediate action and brought about a positive change in the quality of teaching so that pupils' writing skills are becoming stronger. You acknowledge there is still more work to do to make sure pupils reach the highest standards.

Leaders' evaluations of the quality of teaching are sharp and this has supported them in improving the quality of teaching. Subject leaders check on the quality of teaching too. However, the rigour with which they check how well pupils are developing subject specific skills is not as strong as it is in reading, writing and mathematics.

There is a calm atmosphere in which a love of learning is placed at the heart of the school's work. Pupils enjoy their lessons and talk enthusiastically about their learning and how well they are doing. They are friendly and take good care of each other. Adults have warm relationships with pupils, which underpins pupils' views of the school as a happy and safe place to be.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have brought about sustained improvement. Most-able pupils are consistently challenged to produce high-quality work. In mathematics, for example, they have frequent opportunities to use what they have learned to solve difficult problems. Pupils are skilled in checking on the quality of their own work and understand very well when they have been successful. This gives them confidence in planning what they need to do next to extend their learning.

You and the other leaders, including governors, are aware that children's progress in the early years is not in keeping with your high expectations. You acknowledge that adults do not consistently make the most of opportunities to extend children's development and understanding of new vocabulary. You have also identified that systems to record and check children's progress is weaker in the Reception class than it is in the nursery.

Your plans for school improvement and the school's use of the pupil premium funding identify the appropriate priorities. However, these plans are not precise in saying what success will look like or giving crisp performance 'milestones' to help leaders and governors monitor the school's work even more robustly.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. The school community takes safeguarding very seriously. Adults understand their responsibilities well. They receive regular updates, which keep them well-informed. They are vigilant and do not hesitate to take actions when they have concerns. Governors receive detailed analysis about behaviour from leaders. This helps governors to keep a careful eye on pupils' well-being.

Pupils speak confidently about how to keep themselves safe from harm, including from online risks. For example, Year 6 boys told me about the sensible precautions they take to keep themselves safe when they are out with their friends. Pupils also have a sense of responsibility in reporting any unpleasant behaviour or bullying, confident that adults will help them to resolve any difficulties.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding in the school because you and other leaders, including governors, make it a priority. For example, having noticed a few pupils making the occasional homophobic comment, you have successfully worked with pupils and such comments are now extremely rare.

Inspection findings

- You and your team use the pupil premium funding wisely and you are successfully diminishing the differences in the progress made by disadvantaged pupils and their peers. Teachers and other adults are very familiar with which pupils are disadvantaged. Staff are generally aware of the specific barriers each pupil faces, although you agree this could be more precise. Disadvantaged pupils' achievement is improving as is their attendance. You have correctly pinpointed that a few disadvantaged pupils are persistently absent. You and your team have worked with their families to help them improve their children's attendance.
- Children in the early years settle in quickly and enjoy their time at school. Girls in particular can discuss what they are discovering and enjoy learning new skills and using new words. Boys also, for the most part, are settled and making strides in their learning. For example, I observed a small group of boys decorating fish and successfully recognising how colours can be symbolic. They explained that they were using black to show it was a 'scary fish' and included a red circle as a sign of danger.
- When children work with adults in small groups in the early years, they make strong strides in their learning. However, away from structured times, there are occasions when adults miss the opportunity to ask children questions and extend their learning. On these occasions, children become less focused and 'flit' from activity to activity without any significant learning taking place.
- In key stage 1, teachers are skilled in using phonics to help pupils develop secure reading skills. Pupils use these skills to develop secure reading skills as they move up through the school. Pupils, including weaker readers, draw on their skills of sounding out and blending sounds to help them read long or difficult words.
- Pupils of all abilities, including the most and least able, are developing stronger writing skills. The differences between the progress made by boys and girls is evening out and boys are catching up. The classrooms, displays and corridors are stimulating and foster pupils' love of reading and writing.
- Teachers are skilled at making sure writing is enjoyable and that resources are readily available. For example, clip boards and pens are at hand for younger pupils to make notes when they are building models or involved in role play. Older pupils have developed confident writing skills because they have an assured grasp of technical skills such as the use of punctuation, spelling and grammar. Writing in subjects such as religious education and topic is not routinely strong, as pupils are not consistently paying as much attention to using their skills.
- Teachers and pupils have responded to your leadership team's high expectations. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who are least able know that teachers expect them to achieve as well as others and they respond well. Teachers make sure that they have resources and support to hand as soon as they spot pupils in need of extra help to keep up and, as a result, few pupils fall behind.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the quality of teaching in the early years is improved so that adults make the most of opportunities to extend children's language development and assessment supports their rapid progress, particularly in Reception
- leaders' planning for school improvement and use of the pupil premium is sharpened
- developments in pupils' writing skills continue, especially in foundation subjects and leaders' monitoring of these subjects improves.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Hewitt

Senior Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and other senior and middle leaders and three members of the governing body. I also met with a representative of the local authority. I visited lessons with you, looked at pupils' work and spoke informally with pupils and support staff. I looked at the results from Parent View (Ofsted's online questionnaire) and considered 92 responses and the comments parents made during the inspection. I also took into account your own survey of parents' views. I spoke to a few parents as they dropped pupils off in the morning. I examined a range of documents, including information about safeguarding and the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan.