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14 October 2015

Ms Jacqui Lorimer
Executive Headteacher
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Consett
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Dear Ms Lorimer

Short inspection of Whittonstall First School

Following the short inspection on 13 October 2015, 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 2012.

This provider continues to be good.

Following on immediately from the school's previous inspection in February 2012, the headteacher and governors took prompt and decisive action to address the weaknesses identified in the early years and Key Stage 1. Subsequent staff changes have further strengthened provision in the early years. The success of these actions is now being seen in outcomes for pupils. In 2015, all pupils moving on from the early years provision achieved a good level of development. The changes made to teaching in Key Stage 1 have also yielded successful outcomes, with pupils making strong progress in reading, writing and mathematics, resulting in standards that compare most favourably with the national picture. The school has now successfully closed the gap in performance between boys and girls.

The improvements in the early years and Key Stage 1 have been made at the same time as a continuation of the high standards previously seen in Years 3 and 4, the first two years of Key Stage 2. This means that the pupils are extremely well prepared when they transfer to one of the local middle schools to start Year 5.

The executive headteacher has driven improvements across the school, with staff and governors willingly committing themselves to the changes and initiatives needed to achieve future success. Without this commitment and energy, the improvements seen since the previous inspection may not have happened so quickly or successfully. No area of school improvement has been left untouched. For example, as staff have developed the school curriculum to meet the new National Curriculum requirements, the executive headteacher has been initiating and developing

essential areas to ensure that both the quality of teaching and pupil outcomes remain as high as possible. Staff have coped commendably well with these changes, while embracing the need to address the areas for improvement from the previous inspection.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is an implicit understanding from everyone linked with the school that ensuring the safety and well-being of the pupils is of paramount importance. The school exudes a calm and purposeful working environment, and teachers and other adults who work with the pupils fully understand the school's published behaviour and safeguarding policies. More importantly, however, is that these adults apply these policies very effectively in their everyday working practices. This ensures that every reasonable effort is made to provide interesting and challenging learning activities which are risk-free and compliant with expected standards of safe practice.

All staff receive relevant and up-to-date training. Minor administrative errors in the management of record keeping in relation to safeguarding were explained during the inspection and promptly rectified by the school.

Inspection findings

- The executive headteacher has successfully conveyed her aspirations for further improvements and success to all those colleagues with whom she works. She has drive, boundless enthusiasm and a professional commitment and educational understanding, which enthuses others. She has excellent working relationships with the governing body, and there is a clear mutual respect for the contribution which each makes to the school. Staff and pupils aspire to be as successful as possible.
- The quality of teaching is of a high standard throughout the school, and has improved since the previous inspection. Teachers plan to engage and fully enthuse their pupils in all aspects of their learning. Teachers work very effectively with all pupils, providing lessons that develop key literacy and numeracy skills, alongside a range of other experiences, which give breadth to their learning in school.
- A high prominence is given to the personal development and welfare of the pupils. This means that the working relationships between teachers and pupils are of the highest quality. Children in the early years and the pupils in the rest of the school display very positive attitudes to their work. Pupils and children of all ages show high levels of personal confidence in talking with, and to, adults in the school. This means that when they need to ask a question, share the joy of their learning, or simply engage in important personal or social chat, they do so with complete confidence and ease.

- Senior leaders have developed an effective system for collecting regular information about the progress of pupils in reading, writing and mathematics. This method, based on a series of 'can do' statements from the National Curriculum requirements, is proving to be very successful. The level of detail provided allows class teachers and senior leaders to review, very quickly, where the pupils are making or not making suitable progress, and where there are any gaps in their knowledge and understanding of key literacy and numeracy skills. The school has yet to develop a similarly robust method of collecting progress information across other subjects.
- The executive headteacher has thought very carefully about the writing of the most recent school development plan, and has introduced a different format from that used during the previous year to make it more user-friendly for staff and governors. While this plan highlights important improvement activities, it lacks clarity in some important areas; most notably, the way in which senior leaders and managers will assess the ongoing progress of identified actions over the life of the plan. Also, while careful thought has been given to the essential contributions from staff, governors' involvement is not as prominent.
- The school has completed the requirement to have a school website. The current version is shared with its federated first school. However, there are weaknesses in the range and type of information provided about the school's provision and outcomes for different groups of pupils, notably disabled pupils and those with special educational needs. This means that parents are not as well informed as they could be if they wish to find out about the school online.

Next steps for the provider

Leaders and governors should:

- ensure that the school's website is accurate, fully up to date and compliant with statutory requirements
- accelerate the development of collecting progress information across the full curriculum, as an aid to teachers planning suitably challenging lessons, and as a source of information for parents about their children's progress in all subject areas
- include governors more explicitly in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the school's development plan.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Brian G Blake
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short one-day inspection I met with the executive headteacher, three members of the governing body, including the Chair, and a representative from the local authority. The day started with an extended discussion with the executive headteacher to outline and agree some lines of enquiry from my pre-inspection reading, and to agree a strategy for observing the work of the school. The morning was used to make joint visits to all classes to observe practice, talk with teachers and pupils, and sample pupils' work books to confirm that they are continuing to make at least the expected rate of progress in the key subject areas of literacy and numeracy. I looked at the Ofsted online Parent View questionnaire before and during the inspection, in addition to receiving written comments from a small number of parents. Prior to the inspection there was a zero response. At the end of the day, 18 respondents had completed the questionnaire. Overall, the responses were generally positive and where there was disagreement about the quality of provision, the number was extremely small. The six staff questionnaires completed were all extremely positive about the school.