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Mr Peter King
Headteacher
Mowden Junior School
Conyers Avenue
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Dear Mr King

Short inspection of Mowden Junior School

Following my visit to the school on 8 February 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 March 2012.

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, you have worked quickly to establish yourself and address significant areas of historical underperformance within the school. Your senior leadership team present as a united force, and together you are driving improvements across the school. Leaders demonstrate good capacity to continue to move the school forward.

Self-evaluation is honest and detailed. Your action plan correctly identifies where work is needed, demonstrating that you know your school well. Prompt analysis of your 2016 outcomes led to a whole-staff training day on improving outcomes for boys. You and your senior leaders conducted your own research and empowered your staff to seek their own solutions. As a result, your whole staff team have ownership of the planned improvements and understand what they need to do. You have strengthened accountability by ensuring that staff write their own action plans and have linked this to the appraisal of staff performance.

You rely on yourself and your leaders to seek solutions. You use a wide variety of resources and research, from which you pick out what is most useful. You focus on improving and deepening teachers' subject knowledge so that they have freedom to teach what they need to. As a result, your teachers are confident practitioners and understand the needs of their pupils.

Governors challenge and support you and your team, because they have the skills and experiences needed. They are highly organised and ensure they fulfil their statutory duties, including safeguarding duties. Governors have a secure understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school because you share information openly with them; something that they value and appreciate. Governors check that the information they receive is accurate through carrying out their own analysis. As a result, they are well informed and provide appropriate challenge and support.

The previous inspection report asked you to improve rates of progress across the school. Pupils' attainment has remained at above the national averages over time. However, historical progress measures for mathematics and writing have been lower than those seen in most schools. Through analysis of mathematics outcomes, your deputy headteacher successfully identified that reasoning skills needed to be improved. After conducting his own research, he trained staff and carried out regular monitoring of work in pupils' mathematics books. His feedback helped teachers to improve their teaching and address the historical issues. As a result, progress in mathematics improved significantly, particularly for boys, and is now similar to that of other schools.

You are currently focusing on improving pupils' writing across the school. You have identified that girls and pupils with higher prior attainment make better progress than other groups. Actions to motivate boys include using more drama and talk to develop the formulation of ideas and more opportunities for 'quick writes' to develop particular skills. It is too early to assess if this is having a positive impact. However your assessment system tracks the progress of these groups of pupils and governors check this regularly.

Pupils enjoy a broad and balanced curriculum. Work displayed around the school evidences strong links between writing and other subjects. The wide range of extra-curricular activities on offer, including country dancing, choir, running and code club, further enhance your curriculum. A well-developed sports programme offers pupils opportunities to take part in a range of sporting competitions and events. Parents speak highly about the range of clubs on offer.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your governors ensure that appropriate safeguarding measures are in place. Your designated safeguarding lead ensures that all staff receive appropriate training and regular updates. Detailed information regarding any concerns shows your diligence in following up the actions of other agencies.

Pupils behave well and the few incidents on file confirm this. Your new recording system enables leaders to monitor if the same pupil is involved in more than one incident. The recording system has also strengthened the sharing of information with your infant school. As a result, pupils are kept safe.

Inspection findings

- Regular monitoring work across the school ensures that you and your senior leaders have an in-depth understanding of strengths and weaknesses. You record in detail what teachers are doing well, but also refer back to previous areas for improvement in all your monitoring. This is helping teachers to improve their practice and provides a bank of evidence which feeds into your performance reviews. Senior leaders note that since your appointment there has been a 'tightening up' of all school improvement work. This is because you use all available information to support you in moving the school forward.
- Pupils work hard during lessons. Teachers have high expectations and know their pupils well. Behaviour is good, because relationships are positive. Pupils are enthusiastic and apply themselves diligently, relishing the opportunities to work independently. Teachers utilise this, focusing their teaching on different groups to ensure depth of understanding. Work is well matched to pupils' abilities, and as a result pupils are making good progress.
- Progress in reading is similar to that seen in other schools. Pupils demonstrate positive attitudes to reading and choose from a range of books. The majority of pupils enter key stage 2 with reading skills well above those seen nationally. Higher-achieving pupils make good progress, particularly girls. Leaders recognise the need to ensure that more pupils who enter key stage 2 with average prior attainment reach and exceed the expected standard.
- Middle leaders demonstrate skills and expertise in monitoring progress and attainment in writing. They can identify exactly where pupils are applying their knowledge to their work in writing and what they need to do next. You have adapted middle leaders' timetables so that they are more involved in monitoring standards across their phases. Consequently, leaders have a good overview of strengths across the school, but also know where they need to drive improvements.
- Two of your teachers are trained writing moderators. They know exactly what pupils need to do to improve the quality of their own work. The introduction of monitoring grids at the front of books provides a useful tool for teachers to check progress over time and pupils know what they need to do to improve their work. Leaders use the grids to check that assessment information is accurate. Current assessment information shows that most pupils are on track to reach and/or exceed their targets in writing.
- Pupils enjoy school. They speak highly of their teachers and are happy. Parents value the positive relationships between home and school. They are particularly appreciative about how receptive teachers and leaders are to any concerns. Governors are proud of the school's reputation within the local community and recognise the importance of listening to community views. Parental engagement and relationships are positive as a result.
- Pupils are encouraged to take on responsibilities to develop their leadership roles within the school. Ambassadors have recently looked at how to improve the uptake of school lunches. Their work has resulted in improvements to the number of choices on offer and uptake has risen. Pupils have also been involved in contributing to the school development plan.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- outcomes and rates of progress continue to improve, particularly for middle attainers
- the number of pupils reaching the expected level of attainment in writing increases, ensuring better progress for boys and middle attainers.

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

Yours sincerely

Janet Lunn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your senior leaders and representatives from the governing body, including the chair of the governing body, and I also spoke to some pupils. I observed your middle leaders carry out a scrutiny of pupils' work in their books. You and I jointly observed teaching and learning across the school. I evaluated a range of documentation including safeguarding, monitoring and current assessment information. I took into account the 48 responses to the online Ofsted survey, Parent View, including written comments, and the responses of staff and pupils to the online questionnaires.