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Mr Dennis Ley
Headteacher
Holmwood School
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Dear Mr Ley

Short inspection of Holmwood School

Following my visit to the school on 16 February 2017 with Judith James, Ofsted Inspector, 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 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Although you only took on the role of headteacher in September 2016, your previous role as deputy headteacher has prepared you well. You clearly know your school well and have a clear understanding of the needs of the pupils who attend it. Staff who completed the Ofsted online questionnaire overwhelmingly supported your appointment. Those spoken to during the inspection spoke warmly and enthusiastically about your leadership style and future plans.

In the first few months of your headship, you have already faced several challenges. You and the governing body were clearly disappointed that the school has not yet been successful in its endeavours to appoint a deputy headteacher. However, your decision to offer leadership roles to current staff members has ensured that you have a supportive leadership team. The work of these newly appointed leaders is already beginning to bring about further improvement, particularly to the quality of pupils' writing across the school. However, you also realise that there is further work to be done to ensure that pupils' progress in writing matches that made in reading and mathematics.

Your vision for the future is clearly reflected in your future planning. You are ambitious for the school and have set a clear pathway for improvement. The governing body supports your vision. The experienced chair of the governing body has a shrewd and astute understanding of the needs of the school and works alongside you in offering effective support and challenge to your leadership.

The governing body also closely monitors the school's use of pupil premium funding. Governors' conscientious and prudent approach has ensured that disadvantaged pupils make good and better progress in comparison with other pupils nationally.

There have also been significant recent changes to the special educational needs and/or disabilities of pupils joining the school. Historically, a large majority of pupils had identified social, emotional and mental health needs. Some had additional needs, for example, learning difficulties. However, more recently, children new to the school in both early years and in two other year groups have had a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder and associated behavioural difficulties.

Your positive approach to managing the challenges posed by these changes clearly demonstrates your effectiveness and the quality of the governing body's leadership. For example, the recent training you have put in place for 24 members of staff has enabled them to adapt their classroom practice to ensure the best outcomes for all pupils.

You have already put in place an effective model for appraising the work of staff. Rewards are based on staff performance and targets set link closely to your plan for school improvement. This is contributing well to bringing about further improvement, particularly in ensuring that all teaching staff use their subject knowledge to challenge pupils to do their best.

You have brought a new rigour to the observations of staff in classrooms by inviting headteachers of high-performing local schools to accompany you. Their thoughtful insights in judging the effectiveness of classroom practice have helped to improve the quality of teaching and learning and pupils' progress across the school. However, other senior leaders in school are not always as confident and diligent when carrying out this task. This sometimes slows improvement to the quality of teaching and learning overall.

The recent appointment of a teacher with responsibility for the well-being of both staff and pupils demonstrates your commitment to improving the emotional health and well-being of the school community.

Safeguarding is effective.

Parents spoken to during the inspection and those who gave feedback through Parent View (Ofsted's online survey) unanimously held the view that the school is a safe and secure environment. Pupils verified this view by saying that bullying is a very rare occurrence and that lessons nearly always progress without interruption. Staff are very clear about their safeguarding role because you have ensured that training is regularly updated.

You have a very clear understanding about the vulnerability of pupils in your care and have formed close working partnerships with other professionals. This has enabled you to support these pupils and their families effectively in a wide variety of ways. The success of the work you have undertaken in this area is reflected in pupils' levels of attendance, which at the time of the inspection were slightly higher than the national average for a mainstream primary school.

Safeguarding systems are securely in place and a single central record of safeguarding checks carried out on all staff is kept and regularly updated. You and members of the governing body have completed further training on recruiting staff safely, and files of recently recruited staff reflect this well.

Inspection findings

- In my pre-inspection planning, I noted that last year very few children who joined the school in the Reception class managed to reach development goals expected for their age in reading, writing and early number skills. In order to ascertain why this was, I held discussions with the leader of the early years unit. My fellow inspector and I also observed children learning in the Reception classroom and we looked carefully at work in their books. The information we gathered demonstrated that overall, currently children are making good progress within the unit but often, because of their high level of need, did not quite make sufficient progress to reach the standards expected for their age in these areas. However, in other areas of learning, for example in physical development, children's starting points were higher and this enabled them to reach age-related standards.
- At the start of the inspection, I was also keen to find out why pupils in Year 6 last year made better progress in reading and mathematics than they did in writing. I also wanted to find out whether this was true for pupils in other year groups and what senior leaders were doing currently to speed up progress in writing. In our initial discussion, it quickly became clear that you had recognised pupils' writing as a target for improvement across the school. Your speedy appointment of a teacher to lead development in English has already started to improve pupils' progress in English, particularly in key stage 2. The new leader has already put plans in place to bring about further improvement lower down the school.
- A key area for improvement identified in your previous inspection report was to improve teachers' ability to develop pupils' learning through asking key questions. This also became a focus for the inspection. During the learning walk that we jointly undertook, you carefully explained how you and senior leaders have developed the curriculum in such a way that each unit starts with key questions. This has improved the ability of staff to ask questions that develop pupils' learning well. This could clearly be seen in classrooms across the school and has contributed to the improvement in pupils' progress over time.

Despite being new to the role of headteacher, you have quickly established a clear vision for the school that is shared by all staff. This has enabled you to very quickly develop the skills of staff in order to meet the needs of the different and new cohorts of pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- current and planned strategies to bring about improvement in pupils' writing continue at a swift pace in order to accelerate further pupils' progress in writing, particularly in early years and key stage 1
- there is an improvement in the consistency of the monitoring carried out by senior leaders of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

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

Yours sincerely

Marian Thomas
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, the inspection team held meetings with the headteacher, senior leaders, the school staff and the chair of the governing body. We also met informally with seven parents and carers at the beginning of the school day. We spoke with pupils both inside and outside the classroom. The inspection team scrutinised a range of documents, including safeguarding documents, behaviour and attendance files and the school's system for measuring pupils' progress. The inspection team also took into account the views of parents who contacted the inspection team through the online questionnaire, Parent View.