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Mrs Susan Lingard
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Lingard

Short inspection of Hallbankgate Village School

Following my visit to the school on 21 March 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 December 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

Your temporary appointment as executive headteacher at Hallbankgate has ensured that the continuity of education for pupils has been maintained. The extended leave of the substantive headteacher has been managed well with support from the local authority. Governors describe the substantive headteacher as 'inspirational' and they value and appreciate the way in which you have maintained the quality of education in her absence.

You and your leaders monitor and track the work of the school carefully, taking account of a wide range of information. Consequently, you know the strengths of the school and the areas for improvement. You have used this information to produce a detailed plan for further improvement. Governors ensure that this plan is used continually to drive up standards. Governors have a range of skills which they use to question and challenge leaders. They are ambitious for the school and recognise its unique place within the community.

You and your leaders have embedded new assessment procedures in line with national changes. Your use of assessment data is effective. Rigorous monitoring and tracking of individuals and groups of pupils are used to identify where additional support is needed for pupils and for staff. Consequently, underachievement is spotted quickly and tackled firmly.

You have taken effective steps to address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Teaching is now consistently good. Pupils understand their learning because teachers use clear explanations and make sure that pupils understand what they are learning. Adults use effective ongoing assessment to work out what pupils don't understand and swiftly address this. They use good questioning to probe pupils' understanding. As a result, although not yet outstanding, pupils' outcomes are good. Effective steps have been taken to improve the quality of teaching in the early years. As a result, children get a good start to their education and are prepared well for the demands of Year 1.

However, you are not complacent. Alongside the governors, you set clear priorities for development. You acknowledge that too few pupils reach the higher standards of which they are capable in reading and writing. You have taken action to improve assessment in subjects other than English and mathematics. However, you recognise that assessment in history and geography could be improved so that it is more precise. You are taking steps to address this. You also recognise that a small minority of pupils do not attend school as regularly as they should.

Pupils behave well at all times. They are polite and well mannered. Leaders value the feedback they get from pupils and place a high priority on listening to pupils. Pupils value this and they appreciate the support they get from adults in lessons. One pupil told me that: 'Adults give you the right resources and show you the method but they don't give you the answer.' As a result of the carefully planned curriculum, pupils are taught how to stay safe in a range of contexts, including when online. They learn about different faiths and recent work to establish links with other areas in the UK and Africa ensures that pupils develop an understanding of different cultures. British values are promoted well. As a result, pupils are prepared well for life in modern Britain.

Parents are overwhelmingly supportive of the school. They appreciate the fact that all staff know their children well and develop good relationships. Parents say that their children are safe and make good progress. One parent has been 'astounded by the progress' their child has made since September in the Reception class.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders and governors ensure that all policies and procedures are in place, including checks on the suitability of teachers and governors to work with children. You check that training for staff is comprehensive and up to date. Leaders give staff constant reminders and updates in staff meetings. The school works closely with other agencies to ensure that pupils and families receive the support they need. All safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of a high quality.

Inspection findings

- Pupils make good progress from their starting points and achieve well across a range of subjects. The number of pupils in each year group varies from as few as

two to as many as nine, so published information about pupils' achievement varies greatly and is not comparable year on year.

- A key line of enquiry for this inspection was about pupils' understanding of phonics and how well this is taught. All staff who teach phonics have good subject knowledge, which they use effectively. Pupils make rapid progress from the earliest stages and the majority of pupils are working at the standards expected for their age.
- Those pupils who did not reach the expected standard at the end of Year 1 receive extra support in Year 2. This support is having a good impact on the progress of these pupils, the majority of whom are on track to reach the expected standard at the end of Year 2.
- Another line of enquiry was focused on leaders' actions to increase the rate of pupils' progress in writing so that more pupils reach the expected and higher standard. Inspection findings show that leaders had been overly cautious in their assessments in 2016. The current work of pupils in Year 3 (who did not reach the expected standard at the end of Year 2) shows that the majority are now working at the standard expected for their age. Those pupils who are working below this standard are receiving additional support to enable them to catch up with their peers.
- Leaders have ensured a consistent focus on writing and developing writing skills throughout school from Reception to Year 6. Teachers plan writing activities that are meaningful for the pupils, including activities based on individual interests. Grammar, punctuation and spelling skills are taught consistently across school. Teachers refer to the importance of applying these skills when pupils are writing.
- As a result, current progress in writing across school for lower- and middle-ability pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, is good. A greater proportion of pupils than previously are on track to reach the expected standards. Lower-ability pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities make particularly good progress in writing.
- Current pupils in Year 6 have made strong progress in writing and some, working at the higher standards, are beginning to write with flair. For example, one pupil wrote: 'The sky was filled with the colours of spilling blood, and Orphis felt a shiver run down his spine.' However, there are too few pupils across the rest of the school currently working at the higher standard.
- Although pupils have good opportunities to practise and apply writing skills in science, they have fewer opportunities in history or geography. Pupils do not consistently apply their writing skills across the curriculum and standards in writing are not as high in history and geography as they are in pupils' English work.
- I also looked at leaders' actions to increase the rate of progress in reading in key stage 2 so that more pupils reach the higher standard. Pupils, including the most able disadvantaged pupils, read fluently and with expression. Pupils enjoy reading and have a range of favourite authors. The library, which pupils helped to design and build, is used well.
- Recent additional training on the teaching of reading is having a positive impact

on pupils' progress across school. Teachers' planning ensures that pupils are taught reading skills appropriate for their age. However, teachers' expectations in reading are not ambitious enough and as a result, too few pupils are working at the higher standard.

- I also looked at the actions that leaders are taking to reduce the small number of pupils who regularly miss school. Absence procedures are robust. Leaders monitor patterns of absence and where there are concerns, swiftly follow this up with parents. Leaders put additional support in place for families where necessary to ensure that pupils attend school.
- Current absence rates have been affected by specific illness issues in this academic year, but remain around national averages. However, a small number of disadvantaged pupils do not attend school as regularly as they should.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the most able pupils make better progress in reading and writing so that a greater proportion reach the higher standards by:
 - ensuring that pupils use grammar, punctuation and spelling consistently well in English and across the curriculum
 - pupils are given additional opportunities to apply and practise their writing skills in history and geography
 - maintaining a strong focus on developing skills in reading and writing at a higher standard
- further steps are taken to improve the attendance of the small minority of pupils who do not attend school regularly enough.

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

Yours sincerely

Tanya Hughes
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this short inspection, I met with you, teachers and governors. I spoke with a representative of the local authority. You and I visited classes to observe learning and you and I looked at work in pupils' books. I met with pupils throughout the day and spoke with four parents in the playground before school. I considered the 16 responses from parents on the Ofsted online questionnaire, Parent View. I heard several pupils read and observed pupils on the playground and in the dining hall.

I conducted a detailed review of safeguarding, including checking on the school's policies, procedures and record-keeping. I talked with you, other staff and governors about how the school ensures that children are kept safe. I also considered a range of other documentation, including school improvement planning and information about pupils' progress and attainment.