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Mrs Julie Hawkins
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hawkins

Short inspection of North Molton School

Following my visit to the school on 14 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 September 2012.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the previous inspection. As acting headteacher, you have provided stability and vision through a period of leadership change. Consequently, you continue to move the school forwards and have been effective in creating a whole-school culture for continuous improvement.

You have strengthened leadership capacity by training middle leaders who make a valuable contribution to school improvement. For example, their work has ensured that teachers have strong subject knowledge in English and mathematics. However, you identify that there is still more to do to ensure that leaders' monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes of specific groups of pupils is precise and that the findings are used to identify and tackle any gaps in pupils' learning, particularly for middle-attaining pupils.

Pupils are respectful to each other and to the adults in school. Pupils speak highly of the teaching and support they receive. All the pupils that I talked to said that they enjoyed school. There is a strong sense of community between pupils and staff.

Older pupils have specific responsibilities across many aspects of school life to develop their lifelong learning skills and to aid transition. As a result, they are well prepared for the next stage of their education.

Leaders have forged close links with other schools. Your input has been instrumental in developing strong and effective assessment procedures. Regular moderation of pupils' work with local schools has enabled teachers to have a clear understanding of the expectations of the national curriculum. As a result, more pupils are on track to exceed expected standards in mathematics this year.

Parents and staff recognise your good work as acting headteacher but a few also raise concerns that governors have not yet secured long-term leadership for the school. Governors know that they need to take decisive action to address this concern and provide greater clarity to parents about their strategy.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to increase the rate of progress of the boys in key stage 1 who found it difficult to concentrate. Your work in this regard is effective. The school's behaviour system is now consistently applied. As a result, boys now make good progress. Your increasingly high expectations of behaviour have also had a positive impact on pupils' academic progress.

You were also asked to improve boys' writing in Years 4 and 5, particularly the accuracy of their spelling and punctuation. You have made significant improvements with this. Boys are now writing more confidently and using a wider range of writing styles with increasing complexity. Their spelling and grammar work is strong. Consequently, boys make good progress in many aspects of their writing.

Leaders, including governors, are working on the right aspects for improvement. For example, you accurately identified that you need to improve outcomes in mathematics for key stage 2 pupils following a dip in standards in 2016. Leaders' work to address this is increasingly effective. As a result, pupils are making good progress in their ability to reason and solve problems in mathematics this year.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff and governors have completed relevant and up-to-date training. For example, leaders have read and used information from the government publication 'Keeping children safe in education' to provide training on the rapid identification of signs of neglect. Recruitment and vetting records are maintained in an orderly and systematic way with regular audits. You are aware that this rigorous approach now needs to be applied to all safeguarding records so that risk assessments are kept up to date.

Pupils talk with conviction about keeping safe when using new technologies and know that they must not give out personal information online. Pupils report that they feel safe in school and know that they can share concerns with any of the adults who work there or they can use their class 'worry boxes'.

Inspection findings

- My first key line of enquiry related to the rate of progress in writing across key stage 1 for those children who left the early years at the expected standard. The focus on improving the pupils' writing in key stage 1 is paying off. Pupils are systematic in their approach to unfamiliar words and apply their phonic knowledge to spell words with increasing accuracy. For example, in Year 1 pupils are routinely provided with additional resources such as 'word mats' to help them to select adventurous vocabulary independently. I noted that pupils use phrases to add rich description to their stories. Pupils across key stage 1 also use spelling journals independently. They write at length and with increasing complexity and accuracy in their spelling.
- Teachers use effective questioning to check pupils' understanding and shape the ongoing level of support needed. Consequently, current teaching is accurately matched to pupils' needs and pupils are making good progress in writing this year. However, over time, improvements have been slower for middle-attaining pupils and some still need to catch up.
- My second line of enquiry was about how well senior and middle leaders monitor the quality of teaching and learning across school and whether their checks are effective in helping them to know how well specific groups of pupils are achieving. You and your leadership team have a clear overview of pupils' outcomes and use the information accurately to determine school improvements. Your effective monitoring of teaching and learning for disadvantaged pupils has ensured that they are making rapid progress, particularly in key stage 1. Staff are well deployed to meet the particular needs of this group of pupils. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are effectively supported by specific interventions.
- Nonetheless, you know that leaders need to evaluate the assessment information more rigorously to include a more detailed analysis of the progress made by pupils from their different starting points. Currently, there is a lack of focus on assessing the rates of progress for the middle-attaining pupils. As a result, this group of pupils do not make strong enough progress.
- My third line of enquiry was to evaluate the effectiveness of leaders' actions to improve attendance across school. I explored why the most recently published attendance figures indicated absence as a weakness. Inspection evidence confirms that there were tangible reasons for lower rates of attendance last academic year. You have implemented a culture of high expectation around attendance, introducing reward certificates and more rapid communication to parents if there is an unexplained decline in their child's attendance. You also use external support to follow up any issues or concerns you may have. Consequently, your current attendance rates are now high.
- My fourth line of enquiry was about how well leaders are driving improvements in the quality of provision in key stage 2, particularly for middle-ability girls. You have identified that the dip in performance in mathematics in 2016 was associated with pupils not being sufficiently well prepared for the higher expectations of the revised national curriculum and the associated tests. This

situation has now been rectified. As a result, pupils now have greater confidence in using and applying their mathematical knowledge and skills. Pupils demonstrate a secure understanding of how to apply their strong arithmetic skills to solve a range of problems. The most able pupils are challenged well.

- Historically, fewer middle-attaining pupils made accelerated progress in mathematics across key stage 2 to achieve the highest standard. You have improved assessment procedures to address this weakness and this trend is changing rapidly. A larger proportion of these pupils are now exceeding national expectations in mathematics.
- Boys' writing is improving as a result of effective teaching. Work in books demonstrates that most boys are making good progress across key stage 2, especially in Year 6. However, for a few boys in lower key stage 2 some weaknesses remain in punctuation and handwriting despite swift progress in grammar and spelling. Therefore, for some, gaps in their writing skills remain.
- You and your governors have correctly identified that middle-attaining pupils are not making the same rates of progress as the most able pupils in writing. Middle leaders' actions to improve the teaching of writing are making a discernible difference. This can be seen in the high-quality writing showcased on display around the school. Nevertheless, you know that there is still work to be done in securing the same rapid improvements in the teaching of writing as are now evident in mathematics.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- middle-attaining pupils make more rapid progress to reach higher standards, particularly in writing, across the school
- the precision of boys' writing continues to improve, particularly their accurate use of punctuation and handwriting, especially in lower key stage 2
- leaders improve their monitoring systems to enable them to rapidly identify, and address, gaps in the rates of progress for specific groups of pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Susan Costello
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and we talked about the improvements that had been made since the previous inspection. I also considered your self-evaluation of the school's effectiveness. I looked at safeguarding records and explored your recruitment and vetting procedures. I held a discussion with two middle leaders. I met with three governors, including the chair of the governing body. Together we visited lessons across the school and we also carried out a learning walk in the Penguins pre-school. We looked at a sample of books from all classes. I had a discussion with a group of pupils to gather their views of the school and their learning. I considered the 12 responses submitted by parents through Parent View, the online inspection questionnaire.