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Mrs Rowena Sykes
Interim executive headteacher
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Dear Mrs Sykes

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Middleham Church of England Aided School

Following my visit to your school on 25 May 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to ensure that the review of the school's use of the pupil premium is completed.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the interim executive headteacher, two representatives of the governing body, including the chair of governors, members of staff and a school improvement partner from the local authority. The focus of the meetings was to determine the impact of actions taken since the previous inspection. I visited both classes with the interim executive headteacher, observing learning and reviewing pupils' work. I spoke to pupils in lessons and at

lunchtime. A range of documents were scrutinised, including the school improvement plan, pupils' progress information and minutes of recent governing body meetings.

Context

There has been substantial change in this small school since the last inspection. An interim executive headteacher was appointed in September 2016 alongside a new teacher for the early years and key stage 1 class. A key stage 2 teacher was also appointed in September. This teacher left the school in February 2017 and a new teacher was appointed to teach this class after February half-term. A new chair of the governing body was appointed in September 2016. Transition arrangements are in place between the interim executive headteacher and the new executive headteacher, who will take up position in September 2017.

Main findings

The interim executive headteacher hit the ground running upon her appointment in September 2016. She planned and implemented quickly the steps needed to tackle the weaknesses identified in the inspection report to ensure that Middleham becomes a good school at its next inspection. The school improvement plan is succinct and identifies clearly the actions required to improve the school. The impact of actions in the plan is monitored regularly and robustly by the interim executive headteacher and governors.

The interim executive headteacher's relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching and the skills of staff is paying dividends. Pupils' workbooks, assessment information and observations of learning show the hastening rates of improvement in pupils' progress over time. New assessment systems identify clearly how each pupil and group of pupils is achieving. This information is used well to make sure that any pupils, including disadvantaged pupils, at risk of falling behind or not achieving as well as they could are identified. Carefully targeted extra sessions in mathematics and English are putting pupils back on track successfully.

Workbooks and assessment information for the small number of pupils who are in receipt of the pupil premium show they are making similar progress to that of their peers in school. All governors have been trained in understanding their responsibilities regarding the use of pupil premium funding. They now have a good understanding of disadvantaged pupils' progress and know how to challenge if there are any anomalies or differences between the progress that these pupils make and their classmates. However, the pupil premium review required following the last inspection has yet to be finalised.

The focus on improving the quality of teaching has also ensured that more pupils are working in line with their age-related expectations. This represents strong improvement on pupils' learning and progress than that found last year.

The inspection in June 2016 recommended that teachers provide more challenge to the most able pupils. Actions being taken are tackling this issue successfully through teachers' improved planning and their setting of activities in lessons that are better matched to pupils' varied starting points. Much-improved strategies for the teaching of mathematics are ensuring that pupils now have many opportunities to hone their problem-solving and reasoning skills. Advice from the local authority mathematics adviser, higher expectations of staff and new leadership of the subject are contributing to this improvement.

The whole-school focus, training provided by local authority advisers, and additional challenge from the interim executive headteacher are also ensuring a much more systematic approach to the teaching of spelling, grammar and punctuation. Pupils' workbooks are checked carefully, and should errors occur, these are quickly identified and tackled. 'Working walls' in every classroom provide prompts and examples so that pupils can check key words and styles for themselves.

Pupils have been energised by the changes that have been implemented. They speak highly of the improved teaching and more interesting and challenging work. Pupils talk animatedly about the changes in the way that mathematics and spelling, grammar and punctuation are taught. They also report that behaviour has improved and learning is, 'more fun'. Pupils are proud to be part of this small, nurturing school community. The changes made to the now-vibrant indoor and outdoor spaces are particularly valued.

Improved leadership and training of staff, along with targeted support from the local authority's early years adviser, have resulted in much-improved provision in the early years. Children thrive in an enticing, welcoming environment. Children's learning journals and the teacher's assessments of their work show the hastened progress that children are making towards their learning and development goals.

A thorough and brisk review of governance was completed after the last inspection. This led to the significant training and development of governors. Governors are increasingly able to hold leaders to account and have a much stronger understanding of what is happening in the school. They visit regularly and are prepared to ask challenging questions of leaders. They receive much more accurate information about pupils' learning and progress in lessons. The new chair of the governing body is very experienced. She is supporting recent and well-established governors successfully to continue to develop their skills. Close partnership working between Middleham governors and governors from the executive headteacher's other school, Leeming and Londonderry Primary School, is helping to develop governors' skills further and to share good practice.

External support

The executive headteacher has valued the timely support and challenge from local authority mathematics, English and early years advisers. Their impact can be seen

in their contribution to the improvements in provision in the early years and in the quality of teaching in mathematics and English. Reports from the local authority's school improvement partner are insightful and sharp. They explain clearly the emerging strengths and areas that need further focus. This information, along with the executive headteacher's own evaluations, is used to inform the school improvement plan effectively.

Transition arrangements for the transfer of the current executive headteacher's leadership to the new executive headteacher are in place. This is to ensure that the new executive headteacher can build on current improvements quickly on her arrival in September 2017.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the diocese of Leeds (Church of England), the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for North Yorkshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow

Her Majesty's Inspector