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Mr Peter King
Headteacher
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Dear Mr King

Short inspection of Mowden Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 12 July 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 June 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 to the school in September 2015, you and your leadership team have focused intensively on improving the quality of teaching. However, in prioritising this, you have not lost sight of the school's vital work to develop pupils' personal, social and emotional skills. Pupils are happy, confident individuals who are eager to share their enthusiasm for the work they do in school. This was particularly evident in the pupils' end of year performance which took place during the inspection. Pupils sang and danced beautifully, with self-assurance, undaunted by the very large audience of families. Around school, pupils behave well and apply themselves well in classes, identifying the importance of 'being kind to each other'. Parents and carers show overwhelming support for the work you do. Most appreciate that you and the deputy headteacher, Mrs Parker, are approachable and will act quickly to address any concerns they have. Parents praise staff's efforts to help pupils to become well-rounded, responsible citizens. They acknowledge that you support pupils to take their place in the school and wider community, while celebrating and fostering the uniqueness of each child's personality.

Over time, the standards of attainment reached by pupils across key stage 1 have been above the national average. In 2016, with the introduction of a new assessment framework, pupils' outcomes dipped in reading, writing and mathematics, including at the higher levels. You acted quickly to address this, and, this year, the standards reached by pupils in Year 2 have risen significantly and are above the national average in all subjects. You also identified that, previously, boys were not attaining as well as

girls. A whole-school, relentless focus on this issue has led to much-increased progress and attainment for boys across the school.

Leaders know the school well and you use this information to set the right priorities for your work. You and the leadership team ensure that you fully explore issues so that you make well-informed decisions to improve the school. For example, your careful analysis of barriers to learning for disadvantaged pupils has enabled you to take the right actions to increase their progress. By the end of Year 2, the proportion achieving the expected standard for their age has risen this year and is above the national average.

Leaders identified, correctly, that children needed to make stronger progress during the Reception Year so that they were better prepared for the demands of the Year 1 curriculum. The progress of children in the early years has accelerated this year in writing and mathematics because of changes to teaching. Leaders know that they are on a journey of improvement. They recognise that more children who have lower starting points need to catch up quickly by the end of the Reception Year, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics.

Governors expect and receive regular updates on the school's performance and use this information to challenge you appropriately. They tasked you with increasing the proportion of pupils reaching the highest standards of attainment and your success is evident in the current learning and progress of pupils in key stage 1. Governors have ensured that the school's development plans are focused on the right priorities. However, they recognise that the targets for improvement could be more precisely defined so that the governing body can keep an even closer check on the impact of your work. Governors acknowledged that they have not ensured that the school's accessibility plan reflects the school's current priorities, or that the school's website meets the statutory guidance on what should be published online.

Safeguarding is effective.

You have introduced a new system to enable you to keep a closer check on incidents and concerns relating to pupils' safety. Records demonstrate that leaders take appropriate action and involve external agencies to safeguard pupils' welfare. Leaders are meticulous in making extra checks, even when incidents have been resolved fully, to ensure that pupils remain safe. Governors receive regular briefings from leaders and conduct routine visits to assure themselves that arrangements for safeguarding are fit for purpose. In the inspection questionnaire, 100% of parents indicated that their children are safe at school. Pupils confirmed that they have confidence in their teachers to look after them well.

I was extremely impressed at the detailed and comprehensive monitoring of those pupils who do not attend school as well as they should. This close attention reflects your understanding that poor attendance can give rise to concerns about pupils' safety. You have been appropriately tenacious in addressing low attendance by meeting with families. As a result, the attendance of disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who have

special educational needs and/or disabilities has risen sharply and is at least in line with the national average for all pupils.

Inspection findings

- Leaders, including the governing board, were disappointed with the outcomes achieved by pupils at the end of key stage 1 in 2016. In particular, you recognised that more pupils should have reached the higher standards in reading, writing and mathematics. Leaders acted quickly to provide training and support so that teaching and support staff were more confident about the new assessment framework. All staff now have greater clarity about the expectations for pupils at each standard of attainment. Staff have been encouraged to share their practice with each other and ensure that their assessment is accurate through moderation sessions. You and the leadership team have provided regular feedback to teaching staff on their performance. You have made judicious use of your meticulous tracking of every pupil to challenge staff to raise pupils' attainment and increase progress. This work has reaped significant rewards. The proportion of pupils currently in Year 2 reaching and exceeding the expected standards has risen rapidly. Pupils are making strong progress across key stage 1 and their attainment in reading, writing and mathematics is above the national average.
- While most boys historically have made at least typical progress, you identified that their attainment was not as strong as that of girls. Leaders encouraged staff to be creative in identifying a range of actions to tackle this, resulting in a comprehensive plan owned by the whole staff team. Ambitious targets for pupils have helped to secure a significant rise in boys' attainment. The key stage 1 leader worked with other staff to identify a group of 10 boys who had the potential to improve from working securely at the standard expected for their age to reach the highest attainment levels. Staff provided additional support to increase pupils' progress, acting quickly when this intervention was not leading to the desired impact. As a result, eight of the 10 boys made outstanding progress to reach the greater depth standard in Year 2. The positive outcomes for this small group have been replicated across the school with gains in the proportion of boys reaching and exceeding the expected standards for their age.
- You recognised that provision in early years was not ensuring that children were well prepared for the demands of Year 1. In particular, children were too reliant on the support of adults when completing their mathematics work and writing. Not enough children were making faster progress to catch up to the expected standard where they had lower than typical starting points. Leaders realised that adults were spending too much time on lengthy written observations of what children could do and that this process was not adding to teachers' knowledge of children's needs. Adults now spend more time directly teaching children, while simultaneously supporting them to develop the confidence to apply their skills independently. The impact of this was evident during the inspection. Many children were seen working in small groups, unaided by adults, writing their own exciting pirate stories.
- Leaders' regular checks on pupils' workbooks highlighted that the teaching of mathematics was not securing good enough progress from children in the Reception Year. You introduced a daily mathematics session and supported staff to develop

their planning so that there is now a better sequence of lessons to support children's progress. Children's workbooks demonstrate that progress is accelerating considerably in this subject. The most able are developing good mathematical habits through solving fun problems, for example estimating the number of cups of water needed to fill different drainpipes for Incy Wincy spider before going on to check their answers.

- While you have made some good improvements to the quality of provision in the early years, you recognise that you have more to do to ensure that the progress made by children is equally strong in all classes. You also know that the quality of teaching is not as effective as it could be in the outdoor area for children in the Reception Year. You have identified this as a key next step so that more children can make rapid progress to reach the expected standards for their age.
- Although the teaching of writing has improved, there is not yet a sufficiently systematic focus on teaching correct letter formation. As a result, a number of pupils in key stage 1 have not yet developed a neat and accurate handwriting script and this limits their ability to write with fluency.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teaching in the early years is consistently effective, including in the outdoor area, so that a greater proportion of children who have lower than typical skills on entry to the school make rapid progress to reach the expected standard at the end of the Reception Year
- pupils are taught to form their letters correctly and to develop a neat and accurate handwriting script
- improvement planning is sharpened by setting measurable targets, which will enable the governing board to keep a more precise check on the impact of the work of leaders
- the school's accessibility plan is reviewed and the school's website is checked and updated regularly so that it meets statutory requirements.

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

Yours sincerely

Claire Brown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection, I met with you and other members of the leadership team. I also met with the chair of the governing board and two other governors. I

visited classrooms to observe teaching and to look at pupils' work. I observed teaching and learning jointly with you and with a deputy headteacher. I spoke informally to pupils. I reviewed the work in a sample of pupils' books. You presented information in relation to pupils' progress, the school self-evaluation document, the school development plan and your arrangements for checking the performance of teachers. Documents relating to your work to safeguard pupils, including risk assessments and records of incidents, were checked. I reviewed the information and policies on the school's website. I considered the 47 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View) and the seven responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.