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Mrs Joanna Clark
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Clark

Short inspection of Blackhall Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 31 October 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. Pupils' good attendance and positive attitudes show that they enjoy coming to school. Classrooms and corridors are vibrant with displays that celebrate pupils' work and achievements across a lively curriculum. You and your senior leadership team ensure that behaviour is excellent and that pupils are self-motivated and keen to improve themselves. All members of staff help to create a warm and caring school community.

You hold an accurate evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses and are clear in your ambition to further improve the quality of education the school provides. This is particularly evident in the work you have led over the last two years to ensure that the youngest children in the community get off to the best possible start. The school's pre-school group is well attended and your early years provision has grown considerably, as your decision to accept two-year-olds from September 2015 has proved popular with local families. Currently, you have 34 two-year-olds attending, which is well above the local authority's initial expectations. The improved early years classrooms and outdoor areas are rich with displays and resources that ensure that children are constantly stimulated and curious to explore. The two-year-old children make good progress because they quickly learn by playing alongside the three-year-olds and because their teachers and other adults continuously talk constructively to them as they play. As a high proportion of children enter the school with skills below those typical for their age, you work hard to involve parents as active partners in their children's learning and development. It

was good to see so many parents attending the Hallowe'en 'spooktacular' event and learning about the importance of play.

In the last inspection, you were asked to increase the proportion of outstanding teaching. On this inspection, I visited a number of classrooms with you and we discussed how you support and manage the performance of teachers. We found classrooms to be well organised and well resourced. Most lessons were thoughtfully planned and engaged and challenged pupils to learn. You have a mixture of experienced staff and some who are new to teaching. You have arranged for new colleagues to be mentored by your more experienced staff and to attend the programme of training provided by the local authority. You have also recently set new objectives for all your staff and ensured that their objectives are sharp, measurable and appropriately linked to your school improvement priorities. Early on this term, you and other senior leaders conducted a wide range of checks on the quality of teaching and provided individual teachers with helpful feedback.

Despite pupils making good progress in each phase of the school, standards at the end of key stage 2 remain just below those seen nationally. Furthermore, in some classes, your current assessment information shows that disadvantaged pupils are making less progress than other pupils. You are determined to raise standards further, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, and have prioritised these objectives in your school development plan. However, although your plans set appropriate targets for the attainment of different groups of pupils, plans do not include milestones across the year when you and your governors will check whether or not you are on course to achieve these targets.

Your determination to improve teaching and raise standards further can also be seen in the bold changes you have introduced to the teaching of English across the school. Good preparatory training for teachers and teaching assistants has ensured that they are confidently using new strategies to teach phonics. We observed some highly effective phonics sessions taking place in the Reception class and across key stage 1. Furthermore, pupils told me that they are much more interested in reading now because the re-developed library has better books and the reading programme challenges them to understand their books more deeply. The checks I made on pupils' English books also showed that your curriculum is ensuring that they make strong progress in developing their writing skills. Pupils regularly review and re-draft their work, correcting spellings, improving its structure and enriching the vocabulary to give it greater meaning and colour. We saw some excellent examples of writing on display that also showcased excellent handwriting and pride of presentation. However, the checks on mathematics books I made confirmed your own findings that some teachers are not yet sufficiently skilled in developing pupils' reasoning and problem-solving skills.

Safeguarding is effective.

You give safeguarding a high priority and ensure that safeguarding and pupil welfare are very much a shared responsibility across your senior team. You are all trained to the appropriate level and you ensure that members of staff are

knowledgeable and confident to act if they have any concerns about a child's safety. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose.

The school has well-developed arrangements in place to support pupils' welfare. Links with local families are strong and careful thought is given to supporting the school's more vulnerable pupils. For example, the lunchtime 'Lego club' is an effective safe refuge for pupils who find it more difficult to cope at social times. Leaders maintain effective partnerships with external agencies to ensure that the impact of actions taken to protect pupils is monitored carefully.

Leaders showed particular care and compassion in helping the whole community cope with the terminal illness of a pupil at the school last year.

Inspection findings

- Children make a good start in early years. Many families take advantage of the provision for two-year-olds and this early start is helping many to make good progress. Your early years team is quick to assess children on arrival and to draw upon external specialist support for those children who need it. For example, the use of a speech therapist to support children whose language skills are underdeveloped helps them to catch up. Your recent assessments of children entering Reception this year indicate that the early start made by some children has accelerated their progress and helped them to settle quickly. As a result, Reception teachers are now able to press forward with teaching basic skills of reading, writing and number earlier. From typically low starting points, the proportion of children attaining a good level of development by the end of Reception Year has improved dramatically over the last three years. Early years leaders are confident that these improvements can be sustained and expect to attain outcomes in line with the national average this year.
- Pupils make good progress in key stage 1 and attain standards similar to those seen nationally, although a smaller than average proportion of pupils attain above the expected standard. You are very much aware that the starting points of boys in the current Year 1 are below those of girls and have clear plans in place to help the boys to catch up. Outcomes in the Year 1 phonics screening check were slightly below the national average last year, but there are early signs that your new approach to the teaching of phonics is accelerating pupils' progress and confidence. The teaching of phonics we observed was effective as sessions were pacy and actively engaged all pupils.
- Pupils also make good progress across key stage 2. Provisional results from national curriculum tests in 2017 showed that progress rates were consistently better than those seen nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. However, this good progress was not rapid enough for pupils to reach the same level of attainment as seen nationally. In particular, the attainment of the disadvantaged pupils was lower than that of others because they made slower progress across the key stage. We discussed how effectively the school uses the pupil premium. Over time, the school has not provided additional support quickly enough for

disadvantaged pupils who fell behind in reading, writing or mathematics.

- During the inspection, I worked with curriculum leaders for English and mathematics to review some key stage 2 pupils' books. Strong progress over time was consistently evident in English, but we found that pupils' progress in mathematics was less consistent, as some teachers focus too much on calculation skills and not enough on pupils' ability to reason and solve problems. Curriculum leaders had noted this themselves in recent checks of their own.
- The governors provide strong support to the school. They give of their time generously and commit to developing themselves through regular training. They have sensible committee structures in place which allow for good financial management and effective scrutiny of the school's performance. They have a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. However, although governors review pupil progress data across the year and are able to identify pockets of underperformance, they need to ensure that they sustain their challenge and check that leaders quickly intervene and make a difference.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school development plan is sharpened up by adding milestone points across the year at which leaders and governors will evaluate the impact of planned actions
- any differences in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils narrow quickly, as a result of timely additional support
- teachers consistently provide pupils with rich mathematical problems that challenge them to apply their mathematical skills.

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

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection, I met with you and other senior leaders, members of the early years team and a group of governors, including the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. I also met with a group of pupils and listened to some of them read. Together, you and I visited lessons in each phase of the school to look at the impact of your work to develop the quality of teaching. During lesson visits, I sampled pupils' books and talked to pupils about their learning and progress. The

deputy headteacher and mathematics leader looked in detail at some pupils' work with me, in order to evaluate the progress pupils had made over time. I also walked around the school to look at pupils' behaviour and conduct at social times. I looked at the 18 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View) and took into account the 17 responses to the staff survey. I looked at a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning, policies and other information available on the school website. I focused particularly on the progress of pupils currently in the school, especially those who are disadvantaged, the progress of children in early years, and the effectiveness of leaders' work to improve the quality of teaching. I also looked closely at the work of governors and the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements.