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Miss Janet Robinson
Headteacher
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Dear Miss Robinson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Belford First School

Following my visit to your school on 13 January 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 March 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:

- implement the recommendations gleaned from external reviews of pupil premium spending and governance, with continued diligence and urgency
- develop further the role and effectiveness of middle leaders, ensuring that the rate and extent of pupils' progress is central to monitoring and evaluation practices, across the curriculum
- secure improved rates of attendance, particularly for boys and disadvantaged pupils.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the chair of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I spoke on the telephone with a representative from North Tyneside local authority with whom you have established a service level agreement. The school improvement and action plans were evaluated. I also examined work in pupils' books and a range of documents, including reports outlining the findings of reviews of governance and pupil premium spending and North Tyneside's 'one-day review'. I considered assessment information about current pupils' progress and evaluated leaders' monitoring records of teaching and learning. I also observed teaching and learning in all classes with you.

Context

Since the inspection in March 2016, one teacher has left the school and has not been replaced. Another is on maternity leave. Due to staffing changes, you yourself are currently coordinating the needs of pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Pupils are now taught in three main classes: early years, which includes Nursery and Reception children; a key stage 1 class; and a key stage 2 class. A small group of two-year-old children continue to be taught discretely. Leaders of English and mathematics now monitor teaching and learning within their areas of responsibility, regularly.

Main findings

You responded promptly to the previous inspection findings, by swiftly initiating a review of pupil premium spending. You put plans and strategies in place to address subsequent recommendations. The main barriers to progress, along with means of tackling these, were identified. Success criteria and expected outcomes were specified. Governors now monitor pupil premium spending more closely, challenging leaders to reduce differences in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and others. Teachers' planning and interventions focus more precisely upon the needs of disadvantaged pupils.

This sharper focus is beginning to have a positive effect. In 2016, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils reaching at least the expected standard in all subjects was above the national average. Currently, however, differences in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and others persist in some year groups in some subjects, particularly in terms of deeper learning. You recognise that continued focus is needed to ensure that all disadvantaged pupils reach the standards of which they are capable.

Development plans focus on the correct areas for improvement. Objectives are clearly identified and 'measures and milestones' helpfully determine precisely what

is expected and by when. Plans are evaluated frequently and the extent to which targets are being met is documented at regular intervals. This allows leaders, including governors, to see whether or not intentions are being met in a timely fashion.

You have supported and challenged staff robustly to improve their practice. You and middle leaders have monitored teaching and learning with improved frequency. You have made sure that staff have had regular internal and external professional development opportunities. These have focused on the correct priorities. Teaching assistants have valued the training that has been specific to their needs and interests. All teaching staff have benefited from working with colleagues in other schools to build upon and improve their practice. Teaching and learning, particularly within English and mathematics, is therefore showing signs of improved consistency. In 2016, all pupils in key stage 1 reached the standards expected for their age. The number of pupils attaining knowledge and skills at a greater depth in subjects was similar to or above the number of pupils who reached this standard nationally.

A review of governance was commissioned and took place in June 2016. As a result of engagement with this review process, governors reflected upon their effectiveness. They have increased their efforts to evaluate and capture more precisely the effect their work has on outcomes for pupils. Named governors have been assigned to oversee particular aspects of the school's performance more keenly. For example, English, mathematics, special educational needs and/or disabilities and pupil premium spending are now monitored and reported upon regularly by individual governors. You have felt frustrated, however, by the time it has taken to receive a written account of the governance review from Northumberland local authority. Having received the report this week, governors are committed to tackling each recommendation. It is too soon to evaluate the fullness of their response.

Middle leaders have been supported effectively to develop their leadership skills. By undertaking more regular monitoring duties, middle leaders now have a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses in English and mathematics across the school. Leadership of other subjects is less well developed. This means the rate and extent of pupils' progress in the wider sense of the curriculum is not yet fully monitored or evaluated.

External support

You have taken up a service level agreement with North Tyneside local authority. You felt that there had been some instability in terms of school improvement partner support from Northumberland local authority and sought improved consistency. You thereby commissioned North Tyneside to conduct a 'one-day review' of the school's work to support you in moving forward with the previous

inspection's recommendations. A school improvement partner visited from North Tyneside in November, and you received a report of their findings this week. There has not yet been an agreement between you as to how you will move forward with the findings of this review. The impact of this partnership, therefore, is not yet evident.

Northumberland local authority has conducted the reviews of governance and pupil premium spending. This is helping to identify the next steps in improving these aspects of leadership and management, and leaders are already addressing the recommendations of the pupil premium review appropriately. Governors find the support of governors' services, including the expertise of the clerk, valuable.

Northumberland's education and welfare officer has supported the work of leaders in terms of attendance. Penalty notices have been and will be issued where there is sufficient concern. However, the proportion of pupils who are regularly absent from school remained a weakness in 2016, as did overall attendance. Boys and disadvantaged pupils were most likely to be affected by issues relating to poor attendance. Leaders continue to work with local authority partners and others to address issues, and the attendance of current pupils shows some improvement.

Local authority advisers from Northumberland have also supported your work in the early years. This has contributed successfully to improving outcomes for early years children. In 2016, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development improved to meet the national average. Assessment information and work in children's books suggest that this improvement is being sustained.

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

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel

Her Majesty's Inspector