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Mr Richard Oades
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Oades

Short inspection of Highfield Middle School

Following my visit to the school on 9 January 2018 with Andrew James, Ofsted Inspector, 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 May 2013.

Based on the evidence available during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Since your appointment as headteacher in September 2015, you have worked with your deputy headteacher to build subject leadership across the school and establish a new focus upon teaching and learning. You have developed subject expertise to respond more directly to the demands of the new national curriculum. Specialist teachers in subjects such as science, art, modern foreign languages and physical education are helping to equip pupils with appropriate skills and knowledge as pupils progress to key stage 3. While there are signs that pupils are making good progress at key stage 3, progress at key stage 2 remains more variable, particularly in mathematics.

You have developed the roles of middle leaders so that they are more actively involved in monitoring standards and tracking progress in their departments. Subject leaders account for pupils' performance at regular review meetings and by providing presentations to the governing body. You have added subject leaders for English and mathematics to your leadership team to reflect the crucial importance of pupils' progress in these subjects.

Following the last inspection, leaders were asked to further improve the quality of teaching to a standard that was consistently good and more frequently outstanding and to improve pupils' progress in mathematics, particularly at key stage 2. While

there are signs that the quality of teaching is becoming more consistent, pupils' progress in mathematics has been less rapid. Work in pupils' books shows that they are not given sufficient opportunities to develop their reasoning and apply their problem-solving skills. You are aware of the need to improve pupils' outcomes and have recently appointed two new leaders of mathematics to accelerate the pace of improvement. These colleagues demonstrate strong classroom practice and the capacity to support improvement by sharing their expertise. New leaders have plans to strengthen the curriculum but these plans are at a very early stage of development and wider evidence of their effect is not apparent.

You have introduced more rigorous systems to check pupils' progress through formal termly tracking. Senior and middle leaders check the quality of teaching and the standard of work in books. This is contributing to stronger leadership across the school. You are building partnerships with local schools to improve the arrangements for pupils moving to and from the school at both key stages and to moderate standards of pupils' work across the cluster. You have brought in more regular training opportunities for all staff. You have strengthened leadership by giving new leaders access to accredited leadership qualifications and special educational needs qualifications. Middle leaders are now given increasing responsibility to develop improvement strategies although they are not as skilled in evaluating the effect of these initiatives.

You and your team have developed a respectful culture where pupils and teachers interact positively with one another. Pupils have numerous opportunities to build their leadership skills through involvement with the school council, as sports leaders and as equality stars. You have developed a strong awareness of pupils' rights and responsibilities and pupils have a strong awareness of important equality issues. An extensive enrichment programme, involving residential trips for every year group and opportunities to learn outdoors, help pupils to develop their self-confidence and their social skills.

Governors are committed to the ongoing success of the school and to the wider community. Governors monitor the work of school leaders and governors' minutes show that they question subject leaders about progress and the reliability of their predictions on pupils' outcomes. A recent audit has enabled governors to align their monitoring responsibilities more closely to their interest and expertise. For example, the vice-chair uses her expertise in health and social care to check safeguarding procedures at the school. The governing body embraces training opportunities to enable them to examine data more thoroughly and to ensure that safeguarding procedures are up to date. Governors' systems to evaluate the effect of leaders' use of additional funding, for example the use of pupil premium funding, are less well developed.

Safeguarding is effective.

You and your team are mindful of pupils' welfare and safety and take your safeguarding responsibilities seriously. Rigorous checks are made on the suitability of adults working at the school. You, your senior leaders and key governors are

trained in safer recruitment. Staff and governors receive up-to-date training on safeguarding issues to help them to keep children safe. Action is taken to address concerns over pupils' welfare, although on occasions, records do not fully record the actions taken by leaders to address concerns. In conversation and in their response to the Ofsted pupil questionnaire, pupils said that bullying did not happen that often and, if it did, they were confident that teachers and other adults would effectively address this. The vast majority of pupils feel safe and well supported in school and value the respectful ethos leaders have cultivated over the last two years. In their response to Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire and in their free-text responses, the vast majority of parents and carers feel their children are safe and value the support provided for their children. As one parent wrote, 'The teachers treat the students as individuals, praising their personal achievements and encouraging personal growth.'

Inspection findings

- You have developed subject expertise across the school and established a broad and balanced curriculum that is preparing pupils well for the increasing challenges of key stage 3 and of high school.
- New leaders are bringing increasing challenge to teaching in mathematics. In the lessons visited, pupils engaged productively and showed an increasing awareness of mathematical methods. However, these developments are at an early stage and have not yet redressed a legacy of weaker progress at key stage 2.
- Leaders have secured good progress in pupils' writing by modelling tasks effectively and enabling pupils to write in a range of genres. Pupils' books show that they use literary terms to explore texts with perception and insight. However, their progress in reading at the end of key stage 2 has been less consistent as their inference and deduction skills have not been as incisive and new strategies to structure pupils' wider reading are less well developed.
- You and your team have established a thorough programme of enrichment. Large proportions of pupils participate in a wide range of trips and visits and performance opportunities at school. These diverse experiences have developed pupils' social awareness and their self-confidence.
- You and your team have developed a calm and purposeful learning environment. There is evidence that teachers are pitching work at more appropriate levels. Clear challenge was evident for upper sets in their analysis of texts and in their writing in English. These developments are supporting stronger progress at key stage 3 rather than at key stage 2.
- You and your team have shown a commitment to improving pupils' awareness of a range of equality issues. Pupils are trained as 'Equality Stars' and work with their peers and teachers to develop awareness of transgender issues and racial and religious equality.
- You have worked with pupils and your attendance officer to improve pupils' overall rates of attendance. These have increased for all pupils and for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, approaches to improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils have been less successful and have not been as closely monitored as part of the pupil premium strategy.

- Middle leaders are becoming increasingly responsible and influential in implementing improvement strategies and for monitoring standards, although they do not always evaluate the effect of improvement strategies sharply enough.
- You are tracking the progress of disadvantaged pupils more thoroughly and teachers have increasing responsibility for the progress of these pupils in their classrooms. However, the progress of these pupils remains more variable and the use of the pupil premium funding is not leading to consistent improvements in outcomes for these pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- pupils' progress in mathematics is accelerated by providing pupils with regular opportunities to develop their reasoning and apply their problem-solving skills
- pupils' progress in reading is improved, particularly at key stage 2, by enhancing their skills of inference and deduction and developing more coherent strategies to develop pupils' wider reading
- leaders improve the progress and attendance of disadvantaged pupils by closely monitoring the effect of additional funding and support strategies
- leaders at all levels track the effect of improvement initiatives in a timely manner that shows evidence of the effect of their actions.

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

Malcolm Kirtley
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

As part of the inspection, inspectors explored the work of leaders and teachers to improve outcomes in reading and mathematics. We also reviewed the quality of pupils' writing. We discussed the effect of strategies undertaken to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils and looked at the attendance of all pupils and particular groups of pupils.

During the inspection, we met with you, senior leaders, middle leaders and a wider group of staff. We also spoke to two members of the governing body, including the vice-chair. We held a meeting with a group of pupils and talked to pupils less formally in lessons. We also talked to the school improvement partner from the local authority. We undertook learning walks with you and your deputy headteacher. We

also looked at pupils' work in books and folders. We examined the school improvement plan as well as other documents, including the school's self-evaluation, assessment information, local authority monitoring reports, behaviour and attendance information and pupil tracking. We examined safeguarding documents, including the single central record of checks made on adults working on-site. We took into account 98 responses to the online Parent View questionnaire, 48 free-text responses, 53 responses to the pupil questionnaire and 11 responses to the staff questionnaire.