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Mr Jonathan Briggs
Headteacher
Abbey Junior School
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Dear Mr Briggs

Short inspection of Abbey Junior School

Following my visit to the school on 9 January 2018, 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. On your arrival in September 2017, you rapidly got to the nub of what was working well and what needed to improve. You quickly energised other leaders, staff and governors in your vision to develop the whole child, so that pupils can become the best they can be and be well prepared for their next steps. Together with your new senior team and developing middle leaders, you are building on current strengths, tackling weaker areas and living out your vision successfully.

The quality of teaching is improving because of the resolute focus on this aspect of the school's work and the range of staff training and development provided. This includes opportunities for staff to share good practice in school and to observe good practice in other schools. An improvement in the quality of teaching and teachers' sharper focus on pupils who may be at risk of falling behind are accelerating the progress pupils make in their learning. This is particularly the case for the groups you were concerned about, disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities. The whole-school focus on writing is making its mark. Pupils' books, corridor displays and classroom walls showcase the good-quality writing that pupils are now energised to produce as a result of improvements being made and the higher expectations of staff.

Pupils' personal development, well-being, behaviour and attendance are strengths of the school. You worked quickly with staff, pupils and parents and carers to tackle concerns about behaviour on your arrival. The new behaviour policy is consistently

applied by staff. Pupils and staff reported that behaviour has improved significantly. Behaviour in classes, in the dining hall and at breaktime is exemplary. Pupils are polite and friendly and work and play together harmoniously. They are very proud to be members of Abbey Junior School and are caring and supportive of one another. Pupils reported that teachers are helpful and take good care of them if they have a concern. Pupils are elected to the school council and this meets regularly. However, some pupils reported that they would like to see the school council making more of a difference to the school's work rather than being just a 'talking shop'. You have already identified this as an area that needs development and are working with governors to see how to improve matters.

Governance is strong. Governors continue to develop as a team and they have recruited new governors with skills that complement those of the established team. They welcome the increasing challenge that they are able to bring to bear to leaders as a result of the open and honest way that you report on the school's strengths and weaknesses. The school improvement plan provides appropriate priorities for improvement. It is rigorously and regularly monitored by governors. However, governors are aware that there are insufficient measurable outcomes against which they can fully check the impact of you and your team's work. This is particularly the case regarding measurable targets for diminishing the differences between the progress that disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make and that of other pupils nationally.

Safeguarding is effective.

There is a strong ethos of safeguarding at the school. You, the designated safeguarding lead, senior team and governors have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of a good quality. Recruitment procedures are rigorous. Systematic and detailed checks are made on the suitability of all adults who apply to work in the school. Staff and governors are trained regularly in their statutory responsibilities regarding keeping pupils safe and reporting any causes of concern. Concerns are quickly addressed by the designated lead. Referrals to other agencies, when required, are timely and tracked thoroughly. Good partnership working with the local authority's safeguarding officer ensures that the designated lead and staff are kept abreast of any national guidance or emerging concerns locally or nationally. The designated lead particularly values the communication and support from the safeguarding officer.

Pupils are taught to have a good understanding of risks to their own safety and of how to manage them online, in school and in the local community. The personal, social, health and economic education curriculum and the counsellors you provide contribute to pupils' sense of safety and well-being effectively.

Inspection findings

- I came to the inspection wanting to understand what was being done to ensure that pupils' progress from their starting points, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities, was improving. This was

because their progress has not been as strong as that of other pupils nationally over time and particularly so in writing.

- You quickly ascertained on your appointment that, while the standards pupils attain by the end of key stage 2 are generally high, the progress they make from their starting points into Year 3 has not been good enough, particularly in writing. Improvements made to the quality of teaching and to the way that staff now identify and then meet the needs of pupils at risk of underachieving has ensured that pupils' progress is hastening across the school. This is particularly the case for the disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. Work to improve writing is transforming pupils' attitudes and enthusiasm for writing, and, consequently, their writing skills across the curriculum are improving well.
- Teachers know their pupils well and usually use the information they have about pupils' current skills and abilities to plan work that moves them on quickly from what they already know and understand. You and your senior team have noticed that, occasionally, teachers set work that is too hard for the least able pupils and not challenging enough for the most able pupils. Carefully targeted support plans and training opportunities are eradicating these anomalies effectively.
- I also wanted to know whether pupils' personal development and well-being are still a strength in the school because the attendance rates of disadvantaged and pupils with SEN and/or disabilities in 2016 were not as good as those of other pupils in the school. Much more timely identification of pupils at risk of not attending is ensuring that early action can be taken to improve the attendance of individual pupils. Attendance rates are above average for all pupils and all groups of pupils. Indeed, pupils' personal development and behaviour are strengths of the school.
- I wanted to understand the effectiveness of leadership and management and whether the areas identified at the time of the last inspection have been tackled sufficiently. This has proved to be the case. For example, pupils' achievements in mathematics have accelerated well. Pupils are adept at using their developing reasoning and problem-solving skills in tackling their work and are able to articulate their workings out maturely and rationally.
- You have melded quickly a strong team of senior and middle leaders. They have embraced their new responsibilities with gusto. They work with you and governors successfully, to improve weaker aspects of the school's work and to build on the strengths in the school. There is a real sense of energy and purpose in classrooms and when speaking to pupils, staff and parents about the school.
- Governors provide a good balance of challenge and support and are behind you and your team every step of the way in living out your collective vision for the school. They are astute and know that their challenge will be even more effective if the school improvement plan includes more measurable targets to check the impact of you and your team's work, particularly in diminishing the differences between the progress that disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities make and that of other pupils nationally.
- Parents, pupils and staff are highly positive about the school and the improvements that you and your team are bringing to bear. Over half of the parents who wrote comments in Ofsted's parent survey, Parent View, mention

specifically the huge improvements in communication and in their children's education since your arrival. Parents and pupils also value the breakfast club and wide range of after-school activities that you have introduced, which add to pupils' enjoyment of school and the development of their personal qualities.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school's action plan is refined further to include more measurable targets against which governors can check the impact of actions on the progress of groups of pupils
- the influence of the school council is developed further so that pupils can see exactly the difference their views make to the school's development.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you and your senior team, middle leaders and representatives of the governing body including the chair and vice-chair. I visited learning across the school, accompanied by one of your deputy headteachers. In lessons, we looked at pupils' books, observed learning and talked to pupils about their work. I also talked informally to pupils at breaktime and lunchtime. I analysed a range of documentation, including your written evaluation of the school's effectiveness, the school improvement plan and information about pupils' progress, attendance and behaviour across the school and by group. I checked a range of policies and procedures including those to keep pupils safe. I considered the 88 parental responses to the inspection questionnaire, Parent View, and the 62 written responses. I also took account of the 27 responses to the staff survey.