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Mr Ian Johnson
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Dear Mr Johnson

Short inspection of Alston Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 21 February 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 February 2014.

Based on the evidence gathered 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 the previous inspection, the school has undergone significant change. You have led the formation of Alston Moor Federation, of which this school is now a part. As the new headteacher, you have overseen the relocation of Alston Primary to the site of Samuel King's School. This took place during the autumn term 2017.

You and your deputy headteacher have an accurate and reflective view of the school's strengths and priorities for development. You are determined to improve the school further and have high expectations of what you and your staff can achieve. Governors are aware of all aspects of school life and know what needs to be done to make the school better. Your staff have faced significant challenges, not least a period when several headteachers came and left the school in quick succession. Despite such challenges, your staff are resilient and share your vision of providing pupils with a good start in life.

At the previous inspection in 2014, inspectors asked leaders to improve the quality of teaching so that it is always consistently good or outstanding by making sure that all pupils, and especially the least able, can successfully complete their work in the time available. During the process of becoming part of a federation of schools, there has been significant turbulence in staffing and several unavoidable absences of staff. This had led to inconsistencies in the quality of teaching since the previous

inspection.

There is now more stability in staffing and since you became headteacher of this school you have focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning. You work with schools beyond your federation and with the local authority to provide opportunities for teachers to see what good and outstanding teaching looks like.

Inspectors also asked that school improvement planning should be made clearer and more effective by ensuring that all targets for improvement have a time limit. This was to enable governors and senior staff to easily see whether they are on schedule to meet targets. You have school improvement plans which include key priorities and appropriate time frames. There are specific targets for individual pupils to accelerate their progress. These are linked to whole-school targets to raise standards across the school.

Children get off to a good start in early years. The proportion reaching a good level of development by the time they leave Reception class was similar to the national average in 2017. By the time they leave school, pupils usually reach standards that are broadly in line with expectations for their age. However, in 2017 this was not the case. There was a significant decline and pupils made progress across key stage 2 which was well below the national average in reading and writing. Pupils' progress in mathematics was stronger and was in line with the national average. Much of the turbulence referred to earlier contributed to these disappointing results. You are rightly giving a high priority to providing more consistency in the quality of teaching for pupils across the school and there is an improving picture of current pupils' progress.

The vast majority of parents and carers commented on how happy they are with your school. Most pupils attend regularly and are punctual at the start of the school day. Parents also reported that 'the move to the new site has given the school a new lease of life'. Pupils told me how much they enjoy learning, particularly through topic work. Teachers organise visits and trips linked to topics which have led to pupils visiting a farm, exploring a Beamish village and going to the theatre. This helps to broaden pupils' horizons, seeing what life is like beyond their local environment. Secondary school staff teach the Year 6 pupils on a Friday, and parents and pupils told me how this is helping to build pupils' confidence for the transition to secondary school.

Safeguarding is effective.

In your role as the designated safeguarding leader, and together with your deputy designated safeguarding leader, you work tirelessly to ensure that all safeguarding arrangements meet requirements. You make sure that staff fully understand their duty and follow systems and procedures for logging concerns. Together with the office manager, you ensure that all necessary checks are made on the suitability of staff to work with children. When I arrived at the start of the inspection, it was clear for me to see the effectiveness of procedures to check on those visiting school.

You ensure that the promotion of safeguarding throughout the school has a high

profile. You provide staff with training that is up to date so that they and members of the governing body understand the current guidance. You, and the deputy designated safeguarding leader, are prompt in making referrals to the local authority. Together, you rigorously follow up all concerns raised by staff and pupils. You make sure pupils are kept safe from potential harm. You work with a range of external agencies to provide expertise to support pupils' welfare as and when necessary. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of a high quality.

Inspection findings

- As part of this inspection, I explored the impact of the many changes that have occurred since the previous inspection. Parents told me that there had been some opposition to the school becoming part of a federation and indeed to the school being housed within the secondary school building. However, for the vast majority of parents, you and your staff have allayed their fears. Parents commented that 'the transition joining the two schools has been very easy due to effective communication and transparency from the staff'. Another parent reported that 'my child wakes up excited about going to school every day'. Some parents have even moved their children from other schools to attend Alston and told me that they are 'pleased we made the decision to move them... they are making excellent progress and are very settled'.
- The new governing body for the three schools in the federation is passionate about providing a good start in life for the young people of this rural community. Governors, leaders and managers, and the staff have the personal and academic needs of the children at the heart of all they do. They make decisions based on sound analysis of information and regularly review and monitor the impact of what they do. Senior leaders and governors agree that developing subject leaders is a priority. This would ensure that they have the skills to accelerate pupils' progress in their areas of responsibility.
- I investigated how reading is being taught at Alston. Teachers and teaching assistants do not routinely correct pupils' pronunciation of letters. For example, in Year 2, some pupils pronounce 'th' as 'v' and this has a negative impact on their ability to accurately spell and write words. Leaders have not provided teaching assistants with up-to-date training in phonics. For some teaching assistants, their training to provide additional support for those who are falling behind in their reading was several years ago. Teachers ensure that pupils regularly take books home, but these books are not carefully matched to the sounds that they are learning in phonics sessions and this slows pupils' progress in reading. Leaders have not undertaken a thorough review of the impact of guided reading sessions in order to accelerate pupils' fluency, comprehension and love of reading. As a result, progress in key stage 1 is too slow. You have plans to create a library but this is at a very early stage of development.
- Staff ensure that pupils have fun while learning the different sounds that letters make. For example, pupils learning the 'air' sound in a Year 1 phonics session were motivated and excited to think of words using this sound. While they were keen to write words such as 'hair' and 'fair' using their markers and whiteboards,

the quality of writing being produced was poor as some were lying on the floor as they endeavoured to write. A handwriting policy has recently been introduced but this is at a very early stage of development. Across key stages 1 and 2, and within different subjects, teachers' expectations of the quality of pupils' writing have been inconsistent. This is, again, partly due to the legacy of turbulence in staffing.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- reading has a high profile across the school
- teaching assistants are provided with up-to-date training in phonics and reading interventions to accelerate the progress of pupils who have fallen behind with their reading
- teachers are given resources to match books more closely to pupils' phonics phase or abilities
- regular scrutiny takes place of the effectiveness of guided reading sessions on developing pupils' fluency in reading and comprehension skills
- plans to provide a well-resourced library to promote a love of reading are implemented swiftly
- subject leaders have the skills and time to accelerate pupils' progress in their areas of responsibility
- the writing policy is closely linked to the development of reading and that teachers have high expectations of the quality of pupils' writing across year groups and subjects.

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

Yours sincerely

Naomi Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, I observed teaching and learning alongside you and the deputy headteacher. I held meetings with subject leaders, teachers, senior leaders, members of the governing body and the designated safeguarding leader. I analysed 46 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and I spoke informally with parents at the school gates to seek their views. I also took account of 32 free-text responses from parents. I held a meeting with pupils and spoke informally with pupils during breaks and in lessons. During the inspection, I reviewed a range of school documents. These included: the school's development plans and self-evaluation documents; minutes of the governing body meetings; safeguarding documentation; records relating to pupils' behaviour and attendance; the school website; school policies; pupils' work and their reading books.