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Mrs Rachel Cook
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Cook

Short inspection of Cotsford Infant School

Following my visit to the school on 17 April 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 2013.

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 school was last inspected, you have faced some difficulties caused by a falling school roll which has resulted in the need to lose some staff and to reorganise classes. Across this period, standards of attainment at the end of the Reception Year and at the end of Year 2 have varied somewhat from year to year. Typically, attainment levels at the end of Year 2 have been in line with or below those seen nationally and outcomes in the Year 1 national phonics screening check have been below average. You told me it has been challenging to keep pace with the improvement in outcomes seen nationally.

In the last inspection, you were asked to do more to promote the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, who make up around half of the school's population. You were also asked to ensure that your most able pupils were challenged effectively, so that more reached the higher standard in reading, writing and mathematics. You were also asked to reduce the proportion of pupils who missed school regularly.

Published performance data since then shows there has been a stubborn and persistent gap between the attainment of your disadvantaged pupils and that of other pupils in the school and nationally. Last year, for example, only around half of your disadvantaged pupils attained the expected standard in reading, writing and

mathematics at the end of Year 2. In contrast, all of the other pupils reached or surpassed this standard, meaning they were better prepared for the challenges of key stage 2 and beyond. The school's most recent assessment information continues to show an inconsistent picture, with disadvantaged pupils in some classes doing less well and making slower progress than other pupils. During the inspection, I therefore looked closely at how well the pupil premium is being spent and whether it is helping disadvantaged pupils to achieve their potential. I found that most of this additional funding is being used to supplement your special educational needs funding. Most is used to provide counselling for pupils with social and emotional needs or to help those with speech and language difficulties. While this support may be helpful, it means there is little extra teaching provided for disadvantaged pupils who fall behind in English and mathematics.

Although teachers teach with enthusiasm and capture pupils' interest, they do not always ensure that the work they provide is challenging enough, especially for the most able pupils. Pupils' workbooks show that teachers do not provide enough opportunities for pupils to write at length and apply their grasp of English independently. In several of the books I sampled, pupils' handwriting and spelling were not improving quickly enough. In mathematics, some mathematical problems provided are not sufficiently taxing to make pupils think deeply. Although I was unable to observe the teaching of phonics during this inspection, when I listened to pupils read I found they struggled to recognise the sounds letters make and to blend sounds together confidently. As a result, they struggled to confidently read the books they were provided with. Outcomes in the Year 1 national phonics screening check have been below the national average in recent years. Subject leaders told me they feel they have received lots of conflicting advice about how best to deliver the national curriculum and that policies followed in the school have not always proved successful. Some changes introduced this year, for example to how phonics and handwriting are taught and how reasoning skills are developed in mathematics, are still at an early stage.

Last year, overall levels of attendance improved to be better than seen nationally in primary schools. However, the proportion of pupils who continued to miss school regularly remained above the national average. Pleasingly, this has improved this year as a result of the incentives and sanctions you have used. It remains important that you sustain these efforts, because most of the pupils who continue to miss school regularly are also disadvantaged and have special educational needs, meaning they are particularly vulnerable to underachievement.

Safeguarding is effective.

A strength of the school is the caring and nurturing culture that all members of staff promote. This is reflected in the good-quality work done to keep pupils safe and secure. All members of staff actively develop children's understanding of their right to be safe, to an education, to play and to develop their talents. The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Up-to-date policies and procedures are well understood by members of staff, who respond quickly if they identify any concerns. Leaders also work effectively with external

agencies and parents and carers. They ensure that child protection cases are followed through to a satisfactory conclusion and that detailed records are kept throughout.

Inspection findings

- The school has the respect of the local community. Parents who responded to Parent View said you and your staff are very approachable and good at supporting more vulnerable pupils. Certainly, I found the school provides a nurturing environment in which staff work hard to ensure that all pupils are happy and settled. Pupils told me they felt very safe and that children are kind and friendly towards one another.
- As headteacher, you know the school's strengths and weaknesses well. However, the areas you have identified in your current plans for improvement are overly complicated and the most pressing issues are not prioritised clearly. In addition, some of your monitoring activities have focused too much on whether staff comply with policies and not enough on whether teaching helps pupils to learn well.
- Some pupils' basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics are not improving quickly enough. This is because teaching is not precise enough to address weaknesses in pupils' understanding and not challenging enough to move the most able pupils on quickly. Current assessments are not sufficiently accurate and they give an inflated picture of the progress pupils are making.
- For a number of years, disadvantaged pupils have not done as well as other pupils and need more help to address gaps in their knowledge and understanding. As a significant proportion of disadvantaged pupils currently in the school also have special educational needs and/or disabilities, you have concentrated on using additional funding to meet their social and emotional needs. However, not enough funding has been allocated to supporting their academic progress or to improving their attendance. As a result, disadvantaged pupils in some classes continue to fall behind other pupils and some continue to miss school regularly.
- Some pupils are not sufficiently secure in early reading skills and struggle to sound out and blend the sounds letters make. More assured readers also lack the confidence to read with expression and are unable to infer deeper meaning from the text they read.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the school's plans for improvement are simplified to focus on the most pressing priorities and actions are reviewed carefully to determine whether they are improving pupils' learning
- additional help is provided for disadvantaged pupils who have gaps in their knowledge and understanding, so that they make strong progress in reading,

writing and mathematics

- phonics teaching equips pupils with strategies to confidently decode new and unfamiliar words and the curriculum helps pupils to infer deeper meaning from the texts they read
- teaching consistently challenges the most able pupils and deepens their knowledge and understanding
- lessons provide more opportunities for pupils to write independently and at length and to refine their handwriting and spelling.

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 your deputy headteacher, and four governors, including the chair of the governing body. I also met with a representative of the local authority and a group of pupils. I listened to some pupils read. Together, we visited the Reception and Year 1 classes and I also visited the Year 2 class to look at the impact of your work to develop the quality of teaching. During lesson visits, I checked some pupils' books and talked to pupils about their learning and progress. I looked in detail at some pupils' workbooks with the deputy headteacher and the Reception teacher in order to evaluate the progress pupils had made over time. I looked at the few responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View. I also considered the four responses to Ofsted's staff survey and the five responses to Ofsted's pupil survey. I looked at a range of documentation including the school's self-evaluation and improvement planning, policies, assessment records, minutes of governing body meetings and other information available on the school website. I focused particularly on the progress of disadvantaged pupils currently in the school, especially in reading, writing and mathematics. In addition, I looked at the teaching of reading, your work to improve attendance and the effectiveness of leadership and management. Lastly, I looked at the quality of safeguarding arrangements.