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Mrs Leanne Barker  
Executive Headteacher  
Whittonstall First School  
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Dear Mrs Barker

### **Short inspection of Whittonstall First School**

Following my visit to the school on 18 June 2019, 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 second short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in February 2012.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in specific areas. This may indicate that the school has improved significantly overall. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

You challenge and support the whole school community to ensure that pupils achieve the best they can. You listen carefully to staff and pupils and empower them to contribute to the school's improvement. This has helped in the development of a strong culture of learning and behaviour in pupils, and strong levels of professionalism in staff.

Leadership, at all levels, is characterised by a considerable drive, determination and ambition for the school. This is ensuring that the school continues to improve rapidly. Although a relatively small school, you provide many opportunities for staff within the school to take on new responsibilities effectively. This trust in their ability, to lead and develop new initiatives, is clearly appreciated, as shown in the overwhelmingly positive responses to the staff survey.

This drive and determination have an equally positive impact on the high quality of teaching that pupils experience across the school. Systems to check on the quality of teaching and learning are very well developed. They provide leaders with a detailed understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development.

Planning for improvement is strong, and, as a result, rapid actions are taken when needed. All staff, with leaders, play a very active part in monitoring the impact of the work of the school. It is very evident that if any action or initiative is not having the necessary impact on pupils' learning, then it is either very quickly adapted or replaced.

The continuous and main focus of all work within school is on providing a high-quality education for every pupil. This is very clearly seen in the learning pupils experience within the classroom, and the standard of work evidenced in books. Ongoing assessment is rigorous and used very effectively to inform planning. Consequently, staff identify where additional support is required for individual pupils.

Children enter school with skills and knowledge that are, overall, in line with those typical for their age. However, the needs of children joining the school are changing, with an increasing number requiring additional support around speech and language. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development at the end of Reception is typically well above that seen nationally. Every child achieved this in 2018. In addition, an increasing proportion of children are now exceeding the good level of development.

Pupils continue to achieve well in key stage 1. In 2018, an above-average proportion reached the greater depth standards in reading and mathematics by the end of Year 2. This was a result of the quality of teaching and learning pupils experience in school.

The proportion of all pupils reaching the higher levels in writing, however, was below the national average in 2018. Focused and highly targeted work is already under way to ensure that this improves. Current evidence in books, and moderated assessments, indicates an increase in the proportion of pupils reaching the greater depth standard. However, you recognise that writing at greater depth remains a focus for further school improvement.

In lower key stage 2, pupils are making strong progress. This is the result of the high expectations of staff and strength in teaching over time.

Governors bring a wide range of relevant skills and experience to the school. The governing body is led by a very knowledgeable and strong chair of governors. They combine their passion for the school with an astute and accurate understanding of the areas that need further work. Governors are not in the least bit complacent. They robustly challenge you about the impact you and your staff are having on pupils' learning.

You have decisively addressed areas for improvement from the previous inspection. An audit of the school's website has taken place and it is now fully compliant and up to date. Robust action has been taken to address the development of how progress information is collected across the school. Assessment information is quickly analysed to identify key areas of development at an individual and class level. As a

result of this analysis, progress meetings take place. These result in teachers planning learning tasks for pupils, including personalised interventions, as appropriate. Leaders then continuously challenge teachers as to the impact on pupils' progress. Governors now have an explicit role in the monitoring and evaluation of the school development plan. A programme of monitoring visits is in place. These are targeted directly on evaluating the impact of actions taken by leaders and staff, and the overall impact on pupils' progress.

Parents are extremely supportive of the school. They very much appreciate the level of care and guidance that is given to their children as a matter of routine. As one parent stated, 'This school understands the essence of childhood. Children thrive here because of the excellent quality of provision.'

Pupils work effectively with one another and show extremely positive attitudes and enthusiasm for their learning. Pupils spoken to fully understand the need to attend school on a regular basis and appreciate what the school has to offer them. They are very clear about the purpose of education and how it helps them in their future personal and work lives. As one pupil said, 'It helps us when we go out into the world for work and when we are confronted with difficult situations. It teaches us about right and wrong.'

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The school ensures that the safety and well-being of pupils form a high priority. You have developed a dedicated team of staff to ensure that the standard of safeguarding is high. The checks you make on the suitability of adults who work in or visit the school are exemplary. Any pupil who feels unhappy or concerned is quickly identified, and then support is provided by caring adults. Pupils spoken to feel that they can trust your staff and particularly value the care they provide. As one pupil said, 'Our teachers do nothing for themselves, they are always working and looking after us.' You and your staff know the families connected with the school and work closely with them to provide the appropriate support and guidance.

There are detailed, fit-for-purpose systems in place to record actions taken to protect children and their families. All staff in school are tenacious in following up these actions to get the best results possible for pupils. Detailed guidance and support are provided for staff and parents. This ensures that any concerns are recognised quickly and addressed.

There is a carefully planned teaching programme in place for pupils. This supports their understanding of how to keep safe, both within school and out in the wider community. You and your staff are very careful to respond to community issues. You provide additional training to help pupils deal with any concerns that may arise.

There is a distinct culture of care across the school. From the very start of the day, at the breakfast club, staff work to support and nurture pupils. Pupils of all ages are very responsive and considerate towards each other. They recognise that some pupils in school may have particular needs and may need their help.

Whittonstall First School displays an extremely inclusive approach to all families and children.

### **Inspection findings**

- My first line of enquiry was to find out about the quality of teaching in key stage 1. I wanted to check that teaching is ensuring that an increasing proportion of pupils are achieving the greater depth standard in writing. Current evidence in books and moderated assessments indicate that leaders' and teachers' actions are having a very positive impact on standards.
- Robust and regular monitoring, by you and the English subject lead, of classroom teaching and pupils' books, quickly identifies any gaps in learning. Appropriate guidance is then provided to support both teachers and pupils as necessary. Evidence in books, over time, indicates that strong progress is being made. A higher proportion of pupils are currently achieving the greater depth in writing. However, higher-attaining pupils at key stage 1 need further high-quality opportunities for extended writing at the greater depth standard.
- Progress in writing in lower key stage 2 is particularly rapid, as evidenced by the quality of written work seen in pupils' books. This is, largely, the result of imaginative, and very topical and relevant local and world events, that pupils are asked to respond to in their writing. For example, pupils in Year 3 and Year 4 were able to adjust language and content appropriately for a different audience and purpose, while writing about the impact of palm oil and deforestation.
- Across all year groups, pupils develop strong writing skills and demonstrate accomplished writing in their books over time. They have the ability to write effectively for a range of purposes and audiences and their work is underpinned by strong standards of grammar, spelling and punctuation. Teachers teach pupils an understanding of grammar and punctuation in creative and relevant contexts. This enables pupils to use these skills to considerable effect in their own writing.
- Language development is evident across the whole school, whether spoken or written. Pupils are continuously provided with opportunities to extend their use of creative language within their independent writing. For example, pupils in Year 2 were able to create an evocative image of a unicorn through their choice of well-placed vocabulary. For example, one pupil wrote, 'shimmering white, soft silky fur and intricate patterns on its horn.'
- Although, overall, the proportion of pupils who achieved the greater depth standard in reading was above national figures at key stage 1, girls did not perform as well as boys. I wanted, therefore, to find out how leaders are addressing this.
- Leaders have quickly identified, through carefully exploring outcomes, those aspects of reading for pupils, and especially girls, which hindered their ability to achieve the greater depth standard. As a result of this, you and the subject leader for English have reviewed how reading is being taught in school. Where necessary, changes have been implemented. As a result, girls and boys are now being appropriately challenged through the level of texts they are using in

lessons. They are increasingly developing the skills to examine texts. They find out how writers have an impact on their readers, and in turn, how they can then use this knowledge in their own writing.

- Evidence in the books across key stage 1, and into lower key stage 2, indicates that pupils are confident in analysing and examining different styles of texts and can ask sophisticated questions about the books they are reading.
- The subject leader for English has put in place a planned programme across the school year to support pupils' love of reading. This includes opportunities to meet writers and illustrators and look at non book-based texts. They have also arranged a reading challenge to involve parents and carers as well in their children's reading. In addition, leaders examined the books available for pupils to read independently, and looked at whether they were engaging pupils, especially girls. As a result of this, and the use of pupil voice, a range of new reading materials has been introduced in school. The library area itself is being remodelled to become a greater focus within the school environment.
- Leaders have ensured that reading is an integral part of the school and has a high priority within their school development plan. As a result, currently, an increasing proportion of girls and also boys are achieving the greater depth in reading. In addition, pupils spoken to, and listened to reading, all expressed a love of reading and were very clear as to what books could provide for them. One girl spoken to said, 'Books can become your friends.'
- I wanted to find out about the quality of teaching and leadership in the early years. This is because, in 2018, the proportion of children who achieved a good level of development at the end of Reception was well above the national figure. The early years leader has an excellent understanding of how children learn and of children's abilities when they start school. Her strong direction to an accomplished team has created a vibrant, language-rich provision in which children can flourish. Any gaps in children's knowledge and skills that may exist when they start school are quickly identified and are diminishing by the time children transfer in Year 1.
- Teachers in the early years have a clear understanding of children's specific needs and interests and plan accordingly. The highly effective teaching of phonics enables children to identify letters and then to sound them out while forming and writing letters. During the inspection, I saw children independently writing their own sentences including newly introduced 'tricky words', compound words and using a conjunction. Children spoken to were able to talk about the word choices they were making and why they wanted to use them in their sentences. Children were continuously challenged to extend their learning because of the teacher's very good knowledge of their current progress and ability.
- Children are happy and eager to engage in tasks and demonstrate good levels of concentration. The learning environment, and evidence of children's work in their books, shows that they experience an exciting and challenging curriculum. Children's books show that tasks are planned carefully to build upon what children already know and can do, with an increasing level of challenge built in.
- There is a very strong programme of support in place to ensure that children

move from the early years into Year 1 as smoothly as possible. All aspects of children's learning are explored to make sure that they are prepared and ready to move into Year 1. In addition, before children begin in Nursery, staff work hard with children and their families to enable them to be 'school ready.'

Consequently, children are fully prepared to enjoy and learn from the experiences they are being provided with.

- The early years leader has established a very good partnership between parents and school. She works continuously with parents to explain how their children learn, and how in turn they can then support their children's learning at home. Parents' skills in understanding how they respond to their children's work are becoming very well developed, as evidenced in a selection of books seen during the inspection.
- As one parent stated in the free-text responses, 'The early years leader is a particular strength of the school.'

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they continue to increase the proportion of pupils achieving the greater depth standard in key stage 1
- pupils are given further opportunities to produce independent high-quality extended writing.

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

Anne Vernon  
**Ofsted Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, I met with you and the executive deputy headteacher. I held a meeting with a group of governors including the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. I held a telephone conversation with the school's improvement adviser. I visited lessons in the early years and, with you, visited a Year 1 and Year 2 lesson in key stage 1. In conjunction with the executive deputy headteacher, I looked at examples of pupils' work across all year groups. I spoke to pupils informally throughout the day and also met formally with a group of pupils from across all year groups. I met with the subject leader for English and the early years leader. I observed pupils' behaviour at breaktime and throughout the school day. I reviewed a range of documentation. This included the school's own evaluation of its

performance, the school development plan, documents relating to keeping pupils safe, records of evaluation of teaching and learning and the most recent information about pupils' achievement. I considered the 28 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, 27 free-text responses from parents and the nine responses to the staff questionnaire. In addition, I scrutinised the school's website.