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Mrs Keeley Wood
Executive Principal
Thomas Walling Primary Academy
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NE5 3PL

Dear Mrs Wood

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Thomas Walling Primary Academy

Following my visit to your school on 17 October 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in January 2019. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alison Aitchison
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in January 2019

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment to improve pupils' outcomes by ensuring that all teachers:
 - use assessment information incisively to plan tasks and learning across the curriculum to accurately meet the needs of all pupils
 - ensure that pupils' reading books and learning tasks are well matched to their phonics knowledge and skills
 - create regular opportunities for pupils to engage in reading activities to support fluency, expression and deeper understanding by deploying teaching assistants effectively so that their impact on pupils' progress is maximised.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by:
 - securing consistently a good quality of teaching, learning and assessment in each key stage and subject
 - embedding the recently overhauled system of assessment so that leaders and teachers have an accurate overview of pupils' progress and attainment
 - rapidly improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils across subjects, particularly in reading
 - ensuring that subject leaders have a positive impact on the progress of pupils in all year groups
 - developing new senior leaders' knowledge and understanding of all key stages
 - putting appropriate training and support in place to enable teachers to teach reading more effectively and so promote pupils' progress
 - building on the positive relationships with parents so that they can take a more active role in their child's reading development.
- Embed the recent changes in the early years so that more children reach a good level of development and are better prepared for the demands of Year 1 by:
 - ensuring that teaching provides greater opportunities for children to practise and develop their skills in reading, writing and mathematics
 - accurately matching children's reading books and learning tasks to their phonics knowledge and skills.

- Improve pupils' behaviour by:
 - reducing instances of low-level disruption by making sure that learning meets pupils' interests and needs
 - reducing the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent so that it is in line with the national average
 - improving pupils' punctuality.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 17 October 2019

Evidence

I observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the head of school, executive principal, two members of the governing body, senior and curriculum leaders, the chief executive officer and the education director of Laidlaw multi-academy trust. I spoke to pupils informally in lessons, in the dining hall and playground and listened to pupils read. I conducted joint lesson visits with the head of school and other senior leaders. I spent time evaluating the school's action plan and the trust's statement of action.

Context

This was the first monitoring visit since the school's section 5 inspection in January 2019. Since the inspection, two teachers have left to take up a promoted post in another school, one teacher retired and two teachers' temporary contracts came to an end. Two newly qualified teachers have been appointed. The number of pupils on the school's roll has fallen.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

Senior leaders, trust leaders and governors have worked hard to tackle the areas of improvement identified at the last inspection. Leaders have not tried to put 'quick fixes' in place. Instead, they have made changes following careful consideration and guidance using external support. The head of school has been determined to ensure that new, long-term curriculum plans for all subjects have also been implemented at the same time. Parents and carers are positive about improvements made by leaders since January, particularly in reading. They say that their children are happy and safe in school.

The early years leader has prioritised embedding the changes which were recognised by inspectors at the last inspection. Pupils get off to a strong start in Reception learning their phonics (letters and the sounds they represent). Staff have focused on creating purposeful activities indoors and outdoors that stimulate children's interests. Children practise and develop their skills in English and mathematics. Pupils are exposed to many visual representations of words, labels, numbers and symbols to help them make connections to the practical aspects of reading, writing and calculating. These activities are better established in the early years classrooms than in the outdoor learning environment. There is further work to do here. Although still below the national average, almost two thirds of children entered Year 1 with the skills they need to be successful at key stage 1. This was an increase from just over half of the children in 2018.

Following the last inspection, leaders have prioritised the teaching of phonics.

Leaders now use one consistent approach to teaching phonics and all staff have received training. Pupils in the earliest stages of reading can now use their phonic knowledge to help them to read. However, the proportion of pupils who reached the required standard in the phonics screening check in 2019 was below the national average. Leaders know they need to continue checking on how well pupils are learning their letters and sounds to ensure that the proportion of pupils reaching the required standard by the end of Year 1 is closer to the national average. Parents say they appreciate the way leaders have informed them on how to support reading with their children at home. Parents are positive about how much their children's reading ability has improved recently.

The English leader works closely with the leaders of phonics. Together, they have made reading high priority and redesigned the teaching of early reading. It is now planned to develop pupils' fluency when they read. Leaders have purchased high-quality reading books for all pupils. Now, the books that pupils read in school, and those they take home, match the sounds they learn in phonics lessons. Pupils in key stages 1 and 2 now have reading books which are matched to their abilities.

Leaders of English and mathematics have supported teachers with accuracy of assessment and planning work that matches pupils' abilities. As a result, the quality of education in these subjects is improving. In 2019, the attainment of pupils at all levels improved. Pupils' progress across key stage 2 was above average in reading and mathematics.

Pupils have positive attitudes towards their work and each other in lessons. They are polite and courteous around school. Leaders have tackled pupils' low-level disruption by ensuring that work is matched correctly to pupils' needs and abilities. Leaders are ensuring that they provide targeted support for a very small number of pupils who require support with their concentration skills.

Leaders have strengthened systems to reduce the number of pupils who arrive late in the morning or who are regularly absent. By the end of the summer term 2019, persistent absenteeism and punctuality had improved. However, although improving, both of these issues are not fully resolved. Currently, too many pupils are repeatedly absent or arrive at school late. Latecomers do not join in with lessons promptly at the beginning of the day. For younger children, this is usually a phonics lesson. Leaders understand the need to continue working with parents to further improve punctuality and persistent absence.

The effectiveness of leadership and management at the school

The head of school and deputy headteacher work closely with the executive principal of the trust. Together they have built a team of curriculum leaders who lead their areas with confidence. Although leaders were disappointed with the judgements at the inspection in January 2019, they have taken actions to address the areas for improvement without delay. Leaders are evaluating the difference their

actions are making. They are proud of where they have improved outcomes in English and mathematics and early years. They have taken effective action to improve other areas such as phonics, attendance and punctuality. Leaders have accurate self-evaluation which is helping them to recognise where further improvements are still required.

Leaders make regular checks on teaching to ensure that teachers assess pupils accurately. Leaders also check that teaching is motivating pupils so that they are involved in their learning. This has improved pupils' behaviour in lessons. Teamwork is a strength in this school. Staff are united in following the priorities within the school development plan. They are working hard to improve the quality of education for all pupils.

The action plan shows that leaders have a clear and focused vision for the school. Priorities are based firmly on the areas for improvement identified at the inspection in January 2019. The statement of action compiled by Laidlaw multi-academy trust clearly outlines the trust's vision for the success of the academy.

Governors understand the strengths and weaknesses across the school. They have accessed a wide range of training to develop themselves within their role. This is helping them to challenge senior leaders. Governors are proud of the strides that school leaders have taken to improve the quality of education. Governors are supportive but not afraid to challenge leaders on the areas still to improve.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The leader of phonics has ensured that staff training results in a consistent approach is developing pupils' phonic skills and fluency in reading. Pupils now have books which are matched to their reading abilities. This is helping pupils in the earliest stages of reading to become confident readers.
- The English leader's approach to teaching reading encourages older readers to read appropriately demanding texts. Teachers' assessments of pupils' reading abilities are enabling pupils across the school to access books with appropriate challenge. This is helping older pupils to develop their reading and comprehension skills.
- The early years leader has prioritised tackling the areas for improvement within the school action plan. The proportion of pupils prepared for Year 1 is increasing.
- Leaders' actions to strengthen the quality of education in English and mathematics have improved the outcomes at key stages 1 and 2.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Although leaders' actions have improved pupils' punctuality it remains an ongoing issue. Too many pupils arrive at school after lessons have begun.
- Despite leaders' actions to reduce persistent absenteeism, there are too many pupils repeatedly missing school.
- The recent successful approaches to phonics need to be embedded so that they lead to more pupils reaching the required standard in the phonics screening check by the end of Year 1.
- Opportunities for children in the early years to practise and develop their reading, writing and mathematics skills outdoors are not as well established as those indoors.

External support

Leaders and staff are outward-facing and welcome support from other schools. Staff have benefited from a range of targeted support. Leaders work well with the chief executive officer and leaders from schools within the trust. They also work with schools within and beyond the local authority. Leaders across several schools work together to moderate pupils' English and mathematics work. This ensures that teachers' assessments are accurate. Work set is now better matched to pupils' abilities. As a result, pupils' progress in these subjects improved by the end of key stage 2 in 2019.

Leaders arranged for expert external support from reading and mathematics consultants from a local mathematics hub. Educational advisers led a review on the quality of education. Leaders have acted on the recommendations given. They evaluate their progress against the statement of action.