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28 May 2021

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Dear Mr Turner

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Durham Gilesgate Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 7 May 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring 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 to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. I discussed the impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

Having considered the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- support subject leaders to plan and sequence their subjects carefully, ensuring that what pupils are expected to know, do and remember at each age and stage, is clear and precise
- embed a structured, synthetic phonics programme, checking that it is followed carefully, and with expertise, by staff.

Context

Since the previous inspection in June 2019, there have been some changes in governors and staff. Currently, the former vice-chair is now the acting chair of governors. Two teachers have left and have not been replaced due to a reduced number of pupils on roll.

The disruption to education caused by COVID-19 has slowed the pace, and reduced the extent, of school improvement. In particular, leaders' work on curriculum development has been hampered. Some aspects of staff training were also adversely affected as face-to-face training opportunities stalled or ceased.

Pupils and staff have returned to school. Currently, no pupil groups are self-isolating or learning remotely due to COVID-19.

Main findings

The headteacher knows pupils and their families well. He is determined that every pupil will succeed and thrive. All parents who responded to Ofsted's Parent View survey would recommend the school to others. One parent said, 'I couldn't expect a better environment. I am so glad I chose Gilesgate Primary school.'

A warm, inclusive ethos is tangible. Pupils are treated with respect and kindness by adults. Relationships are warm and professional. Where necessary, staff offer gentle reminders and encouragement to pupils about school rules. Pupils behave well and an air of calm industry prevails.

Leaders lost no time in tackling the recommendations of the previous inspection report. Staff training focused appropriately on the priorities identified by inspectors, such as improving the mathematics curriculum and deploying teaching support staff more effectively. Leaders are confident that the overall quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved as a result of their actions.

Leaders use assessment well to identify gaps in pupils' knowledge and to spot pupils at risk of falling behind in English and mathematics. Extra support is put in place to help pupils catch up promptly. For example, after repeated partial school closures, leaders found that pupils' basic number knowledge and fluency in mathematics had dipped. Leaders made time in the curriculum to tackle such priorities. Extra, daily number work and the revisiting of important mathematical knowledge are helping pupils to get back on track.

Leaders aim to inspire a lifelong love of reading among pupils. They have invested heavily in a range of new reading materials, including some phonetically decodable books which are linked to the Department for Education's 'Letters and Sounds' strategy. Staff read stories to pupils each day. They set aside extra time to help pupils at risk of falling behind in their reading. Phonics teaching happens every day.

However, some pupils read books that are not well matched to their phonics knowledge. Not all staff who teach early reading and phonics have the knowledge required to do so effectively. There is no structured synthetic phonics programme in place to support staff in building their expertise. Such issues are slowing the pace of pupils' progress in reading.

Leaders draw effectively on the expertise of external agencies. They employ a 'positive futures adviser' to support pupils' development. Staff collaborate with speech therapists, educational psychologists, police and social workers to meet the needs of pupils and their families. Leaders place a high priority on pupils' welfare.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified and helped promptly when needs arise. For example, hearing-impaired pupils work closely with their peers and have regular specialist input. Parents who responded to Ofsted's survey are positive about the care and education that their child receives.

The headteacher feels that: 'The curriculum should be about inspiring pupils and helping them to know what it is that's great about the world.' His enthusiasm is infectious. Subject leaders are passionate about the subjects they lead. Some subject-specific training has taken place recently, for example, in art. In other subjects, training has either been interrupted by COVID-19 or moved online or to a virtual arena. This has contributed to an inconsistency in subject leadership and in teachers' subject expertise.

Leaders know that work on the curriculum needs to be prioritised. Work is further ahead in some subjects than in others. Not all subject leaders can pinpoint the most important knowledge and vocabulary pupils need to learn from the early years onwards. In plans, specific detail about what pupils should be able to do, know and remember is missing or is too vague.

Staff feel that COVID-19 has added an extra layer to their roles and responsibilities. However, they understand the reasons for this and feel well supported by leaders. For example, they feel that if they needed additional time, resources or training to manage aspects of their role, leaders would listen and find solutions. Staff feel valued and know that their opinions count.

Governors are supportive of staff. COVID-19 has hindered some of their plans for visiting and checking the school's work in person. Governors are starting to ask more challenging questions about the curriculum and early reading.

Additional support

School leaders draw on the support of the local authority and other school leaders effectively. This includes in terms of subject-specific developments where local authority partners have supported leaders with their curriculum thinking. However, curriculum development is inconsistent in quality. COVID-19 restrictions have

hampered some subject-specific training, as meetings were suspended or postponed. Subject leaders have not had the opportunity to learn from experienced external colleagues and subject associations.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the headteacher, other senior leaders, staff, representatives of those responsible for governance and a representative from the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. Some meetings were held virtually.

I listened to pupils reading with school staff and checked the responses of staff and parents to Ofsted's surveys. I examined school documentation, including leaders' whole-school and curriculum improvement plans.

I am copying this letter to the acting 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 reports website.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel
Her Majesty's Inspector