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18 June 2021

Andrew Roberts
Executive Principal
Central Primary School
Milburn Road
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Dear Mr Roberts

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Central Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 18 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:

- plan and sequence each subject precisely, detailing what pupils are expected to know, be able to do and remember as they move through the school
- continue to support and challenge subject leaders to clearly demonstrate the impact that their actions are having on pupils' learning and progress.

Context

Since the previous inspection in October 2019, senior leaders have brought about stability in terms of staffing. Recruiting and retaining staff have proven difficult in the past. This frustrated leaders' ability to hone the quality of education and plan for the future. However, leaders are confident that the right people are now in place, sharing their ambition and vision for improvement.

Leaders' priorities have had to shift and change due to the disruption caused by COVID-19. As a result, the pace of improvement in some areas has slowed. Leaders' plans to refine the curriculum have been hampered. The manner in which leaders have been able to deliver and monitor their subjects has altered.

Some governors are new since the previous inspection. A new chair of governors has recently been appointed.

Main findings

Leaders have high aspirations for pupils. They aim for pupils to be lifelong learners who are ambitious, happy and fulfilled. Relationships between staff and pupils are warm and respectful. Teachers take time to listen to pupils' dreams and hopes, talking with them about careers, pathways and life choices. Visitors are used to inspire pupils and excite their interests in a wide range of matters, from archery to opera. Such curriculum enrichment helps pupils to see the benefits of learning and prepares them well for later life.

Leaders understand the importance of strong home/school relationships for pupils' attendance, engagement and success. Where appropriate, parents are invited to embellish the curriculum by contributing their expert knowledge, for example about farming or gardening. One parent commented that, 'Communication is great'. Leaders also draw on the expertise of police, family support services and mental health teams to meet the needs of pupils and their families. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified promptly and given the help they need to succeed. Pupils' attendance is improving.

Pupils' personal, social, emotional and mental health development is a priority for leaders, particularly following the pandemic. Pupils have trusted adults in school with whom they can discuss any concerns. Topical issues, such as relationships and the changes in our lifestyles due to COVID-19, are discussed and debated. Staff value pupils' opinions.

Reading is high on everybody's agenda. Staff know that reading offers pupils a key to success across the curriculum and in later life. They share their favourite books and read to pupils every day. There are books aplenty, including online. Pupils read in class, in dens and in outdoor spaces as well as in the libraries on each school site.

Pupils read frequently to staff, and those who need additional help or practice get it. Pupils are proud of their reading. A love of reading is being promoted effectively.

Leaders understand the relationship between pupils' ability to use an increasingly sophisticated vocabulary and their reading success. A firm focus on building pupils' vocabulary starts in the provision for two-year-olds and continues throughout the school. Staff are well trained in teaching systematic synthetic phonics. Phonics happens at least once a day. Staff model the correct pronunciation of letters, sounds and words for pupils, expertly. Books are well matched to pupils' phonics knowledge.

School leaders are moving the school in the right direction. They are taking the correct action to tackle the areas of weaknesses identified in the previous inspection and are doing so as promptly as possible. For example, leaders have capitalised on technology to improve the quality of teaching. Staff confidently use video to film, discuss and develop their practices, with leaders and peers. Teachers and teaching support staff value the professional development opportunities leaders provide. Staff feel leaders are considerate of their workload.

Some subject leaders are new to post, while others are very experienced and know their subjects inside out. All are passionate about their responsibilities and are keen to ensure that pupils do well. Subject expertise is building, due to senior leaders pinpointing the right opportunities and training for staff. The quality of subject plans is developing well but some inconsistencies remain. Not all plans show clearly what pupils should know, be able to do and remember over time. Some leaders are learning to identify and explain more precisely the impact that they are having on pupils' progress and learning.

Leaders ensure that mathematics starts with two-year-olds. Mathematics happens daily. Regular checks and assessment help leaders to identify any gaps in pupils' learning. Leaders' focus on securing pupils' basic number skills and fluency has helped to prevent pupils falling behind in their learning. Support for pupils is timely, and interventions to address misconceptions often happen 'on the spot'. Leaders feel confident that pupils' knowledge and understanding of mathematics across the school are much improved.

Governors are proud of their school. They have faith that leaders' actions are making a positive difference for pupils. Governors monitor leaders' work remotely at present to see for themselves what is happening. They offer much support for staff and ask challenging questions of leaders, for example about pupils' attendance. Occasionally, governors do not probe leaders' responses to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of leaders' actions on the quality of the curriculum. The new chair of governors already has plans in place to sharpen this aspect of governors' work.

Additional support

Leaders are outward facing in their search for support and greater challenge. Subject leaders get involved with educational research, subject associations, local subject Hubs and leaders from other schools. This is helping to broaden and deepen leaders' subject expertise and knowledge.

Senior leaders draw on expertise from across the trust and share best practice as well as offering constructive feedback to each other. They also work well with the local authority. Leaders feel confident that this critical friendship is supporting the school's improvement journey effectively. Governors take advantage of training provided by Northumberland's governor services.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the executive principal, the head of school, other senior leaders, representatives of those responsible for governance and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I examined a range of documents, including governors' minutes and subject plans, listened to children reading with familiar adults and held a telephone conversation with the headteacher of the Northumberland Pupil Referral Unit. I looked at the 28 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and 73 staff questionnaires.

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 reports website.

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel
Her Majesty's Inspector