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Ms Ann Dixon
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Dixon

Short inspection of Firthmoor Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 9 November 2016 with Kirsty Godfrey HMI, 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 July 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection.

The emotional well-being of pupils is at the heart of everything the school does. Strong pastoral systems support pupils well. Positive parental relationships help to break down barriers to learning and raise expectations of pupils. The free breakfast club provides a valuable resource for families and ensures that pupils enter school ready to learn each day.

Leaders have addressed the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Marking and feedback help pupils to understand how to improve their work, providing further challenge for some pupils and reinforcement for others. Pupils are proud of their work and can demonstrate where they have been particularly successful. They know what they need to do next in order to meet their targets.

The headteacher leads the school with understated confidence. She works alongside staff, developing their strengths and highlighting areas of development in their teaching and learning. Leaders speak highly of the success culture she has created; staff are empowered to try out new initiatives in their quest for continued improvement. Positive relationships help teachers to learn from each other and share best practice. This is developing reflective practitioners who are focused on ensuring the best outcomes for pupils.

Well-planned activities capture pupils' imagination and, as a result, pupils say they enjoy school. The broad and balanced curriculum is enriched through a wide variety of curriculum enhancements. Pupils enjoy regular visits and visitors, which broaden their knowledge and provide a real purpose for writing. The range of after-school clubs on offer gives pupils opportunities to try new sports and crafts regularly.

Leaders have rightly identified reading as a key area to improve this academic year. This is because they were disappointed with the 2016 results at the end of key stage 2. More frequent and shorter reading sessions have been put in place, alongside mastering key skills before moving on to other areas. This is giving more rigour and depth to learning. Previous improvements to support reading have resulted in much-improved phonics outcomes across key stage 1.

Further work is required to improve the outcomes at the end of the early years. While there are many strengths throughout the provision, standards remain too low. Not enough children reach the expected standard and leaders are not identifying enough children who can exceed the expected standard. Leaders are complicating the process by insisting on the collection of too much evidence before making judgements.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Action to keep pupils safe is effective. Vulnerable pupils are supported through strong pastoral work. Links with other agencies are strong. Pupils say that bullying is rare and pupils behave well. Parents agree that pupils are safe and well cared for.

Inspection findings

- Leaders regularly check on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. They have a clear picture of strengths across the school and deploy staff effectively. The deputy headteacher has been successful in raising standards at the end of key stage 1. Results in 2016 show that outcomes are now similar to those found nationally for the first time.
- Writing work shows that standards are high and pupils reach standards above those seen nationally. Teachers use visits and visitors well to excite and inspire pupils to write. Pupils in key stage 2 were learning how to use the possessive apostrophe and applying their learning to their own writing. Handwriting and presentation is neat and pupils are rightly proud of their work.
- Teachers adapt their teaching to meet the needs of pupils. For example, in Year 6, effective small-group teaching provided for pupils in reading helps them to catch up. Pupils complete the same tasks as the rest of the class. Good questioning challenges the most able readers to extend their vocabulary and give more depth to their answers.

- Work in the early years is pitched at the right level and children are highly motivated to learn. Well-matched provision meets the needs of pupils. Adults skilfully support and consolidate learning. Language development is at the core of learning and adults model correct language use and encourage children to explain their thinking. Activities provided are exciting and relevant to young children. As a result, children develop positive attitudes to learning, are happy and make good progress. However, outcomes at the end of Reception do not reflect the progress seen and are still too low. Not enough children are targeted to meet the expected standard or to exceed the standard.
- The behaviour of pupils is a strength of the school. Pupils are independent learners and show positive attitudes to their work, working hard to complete tasks. In most classes, learning has pace and pupils are motivated to learn. Pupils want to work hard and enjoy the challenges given. Pupils apply themselves well to their learning and are confident in their abilities.
- In the early years, pupils demonstrate good application of their phonic skills when reading unknown words. Both the most and least able readers apply their phonic knowledge to help them. Reading records are regularly completed and pupils enjoy talking about well-known stories.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- standards at the end of the early years continue to improve at a faster pace, by targeting more teaching to meet identified gaps in learning and increasing the number of children who meet and exceed national expectations
- outcomes in reading continue to improve at the end of key stage 2, by ensuring that actions identified in your development plan are implemented swiftly.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Darlington. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Lunn
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection we met with you, with key leaders and representatives from the governing body. We looked at a variety of documentation, including the school improvement plan, self-evaluation and progress information. Policies and information provided on the school website were taken into account. You and your deputy headteacher accompanied us on our visits to classrooms. We sampled learning journals, and writing, mathematics and topic books to support our judgements on the progress pupils are making.

Key areas looked at during the inspection

- How effective is marking and feedback in helping pupils to improve their work?
- How are leaders ensuring that more pupils reach greater depth at the end of key stage 2?
- Why are early years outcomes so low, and how are leaders addressing this?
- How broad and balanced is the curriculum across the school?
- Is safeguarding effective?