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Mr Steve Haigh
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Haigh

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Whickham School

Following my visit to your school on 22 June 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in January 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- develop governors' expertise in using information about the school's performance so that they can challenge leaders more rigorously
- make sure that the achievement of disadvantaged pupils continues to improve in order to close the gap between these pupils and others at the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and members of your senior and middle leadership teams to discuss the school's progress and response to the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. I also met with 4 governors, including the chair of the governing body, and with a representative of the local authority. I visited a range of classrooms and spoke with pupils about their work and attitudes to school. I met more formally with a group of Year 7 pupils at lunchtime. I

examined the school's safeguarding arrangements. I met with the school's head girl and head boy at breaktime.

Main findings

The headteacher is very clear about what needs to be done to improve the school. Working with governors and with his leadership teams, he has moved swiftly and effectively to address the inconsistencies in the quality of teaching. He has worked robustly and carefully with staff to develop and maintain a culture of high expectations. This is having a positive impact on pupils' outcomes.

Senior leaders are determined to improve the quality of teaching and eradicate inconsistency. They monitor teaching carefully and robustly. They use a range of sources of information, including regular lesson observations, the scrutiny of pupils' work and conversations with pupils, to help staff reflect on and improve the quality of their teaching. Staff report that this is challenging, but that it is having a positive impact on the work of the school. One member of staff reported that there had been a 'profound culture shift'. She welcomed this.

Inspection evidence shows that governors are clear about what the school needs to do to improve. They report that they are gaining in confidence in their ability to interpret information and data about pupils' progress. This increasingly detailed understanding is helping them improve and focus their challenge of leaders about the work of the school. However, this increased level of challenge is not reflected in the records of governors' formal meetings. These records do not show sufficient detail about the governors' work, especially around the progress that pupils are making.

The school's plans are clear and detailed and address the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. They contain ambitious yet realistic targets that set out clearly what needs to be done, by when and by whom. The plans contain clear indications of how the impact of the school's actions will be assessed.

The school is working effectively to address the weaknesses in the teaching of mathematics identified in the previous inspection report. As a result of senior leaders' actions, the leadership of mathematics is now more effective and the quality of teaching is being more carefully and robustly monitored. Pupils report that they now have more opportunities to explore 'open-ended' problems. This has added to their pleasure in learning and is having a positive impact on their outcomes in mathematics. Inspection evidence supports this. Work in books is marked carefully, following the school's own assessment policy, and there is evidence of greater depth in pupils' understanding of mathematical concepts.

The work of middle leaders at the school is increasingly effective. They are well supported by members of the senior team. Middle leaders work closely together and are now firmly focused on improving teaching in their areas of the school. They achieve this through regular monitoring and training for their teams. For example, middle leaders have led after-school sessions aimed at improving the quality of

teachers' questioning of pupils. These sessions, which involve teachers from across the curriculum working together, have helped staff develop their questioning skills so that they can better help pupils develop, extend and deepen their learning. Pupils report that they have noticed and welcome this more challenging approach to questioning.

The progress of disadvantaged pupils (those who are eligible for pupil premium funding) is improving, particularly in key stage 3. The gap between their achievement and that of other pupils with similar starting points nationally is closing. Leaders acknowledge that the gap is still too wide, however, and they recognise that more work needs to be done in order for this gap to close more rapidly.

External support

The school has received effective support from the local authority in the monitoring of the quality of teaching. The local authority has also been effective in the advice and support it has given leaders over a range of staffing issues. The school has been supported effectively by Cardinal Hume Catholic School and St Thomas More Catholic School. These two local outstanding schools have supported leaders and helped Whickham further develop its work in monitoring the quality of teaching.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Evans
Her Majesty's Inspector