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Ms Julie Davidson
Headteacher
Red Hall Primary School
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Dear Ms Davidson

Short inspection of Red Hall Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 3 July 2018, 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 March 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in specific areas. This may indicate that the school has improved significantly overall. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

You and your team, including governors, are dedicated and passionate about making sure that pupils achieve the best they can. There have been marked improvements in the standards pupils reach and particularly in the progress they make from their low starting points. Pupils make very strong progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Disadvantaged pupils, who account for more than three quarters of the school's pupil population, do equally well.

You and your team are determined in supporting vulnerable pupils and their families to overcome significant difficulties in their lives. Consequently, pupils, parents and carers hold the school in very high esteem. Staff also enjoy their work, feel valued and are keen to try new ideas. Morale is high and there is an atmosphere of cheerful optimism.

You and other leaders have worked hard since the previous inspection to ensure that pupils develop a love of reading. Pupils are encouraged to read through a variety of means, including a well-stocked reading corner in each classroom. Pupils have high-quality opportunities to read a wide range of texts in lessons, including demanding fiction and non-fiction works.

Pupils' attitudes to learning are excellent. The atmosphere in school is calm and purposeful. Pupils are routinely challenged by teachers to think through problems and offer reasons for their answers, particularly in mathematics. Pupils are confident in editing their own work and reflecting on how they can improve it. They seek out answers for themselves using resources that are readily available in classrooms. The quality of dialogue between pupils and adults is impressive.

You and your team have designed an exciting curriculum, which includes memorable moments. Pupils find the trips, visits and outdoor activities at the start of units of work highly stimulating and motivating. This has had a particularly positive effect on the quality of pupils' writing. You and your team have recently focused successfully on making sure that writing in foundation subjects is of the same quality as it is in English. Because of the broad curriculum, pupils are making strong progress across a range of subjects. However, your assessment of pupils' progress in foundation subjects is not as strong as it is for reading, writing and mathematics. This hinders leaders in gauging the full extent of the progress pupils have made.

Leaders are very skilful in ensuring that children in the early years, including two year olds, get off to a strong start in developing a rich vocabulary. There are plenty of opportunities for them to develop their speaking, reading, writing and mathematics skills. The environment lends itself to children experimenting with the world around them. Adults are adept at extending children's learning by asking exactly the right question or finding the right resource. However, leaders have not developed the outdoor area with the same attention to detail, and the chances for children to carry on learning outside do not match the excellent opportunities provided by the indoor space.

You and your team are dogged in making sure that pupils improve their attendance, and this has been successful to a large extent. Pupils' absences have reduced and are now closer to the national average. Your team works well with pupils who are persistently absent and their families. You have employed staff who are dedicated to helping families overcome barriers. However, despite the best efforts of you and your team, the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent remains above the national average.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. You and your leaders place safeguarding at the top of your agenda. Governors have supported you in making sure that there is a strong team in place. Vulnerable pupils and their families value the time and expertise of the team.

Staff have a strong understanding of their responsibilities. They are well trained and have secure knowledge of a comprehensive range of issues. They are alert to any signs and symptoms which might indicate a child is at risk of harm. Reporting and recording systems are of a high quality. The high number of vulnerable pupils who face significant difficulties in their lives are extremely well supported.

Pupils can talk confidently about keeping themselves safe. Older pupils understand the nature of controlling relationships and how to deal with them. They have a great deal of trust in the adults in school to support them, should they need help. Pupils explained that they can discuss sensitive subjects and feel safe to do so.

Pupils who have identified behaviour difficulties are developing effective strategies to help them make positive choices. Other pupils are understanding of the different needs of others. Consequently, the school provides a safe and nurturing environment for pupils.

Inspection findings

- Teachers use the exciting curriculum very well to motivate and enthuse pupils. The curriculum is designed to create memorable moments, which will stick in pupils' memories, and it does. Pupils in Year 6 were very keen to tell me about their trip to Eden Camp. They used their experiences to write convincingly about the Second World War, drawing on all their senses. The most able pupils rise to the challenge teachers set them with relish.
- When we looked in books, we noted that pupils are equally enthusiastic about subjects such as history and geography. We could see that disadvantaged pupils do just as well as others. Pupils are developing strong general knowledge and a thirst for finding things out for themselves. However, we agreed that teachers' initial assessments of pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding in foundation subjects do not capture the full extent of what pupils know and can do.
- Teachers and teaching assistants are accomplished in making sure that they consider pupils' needs when they plan learning. When we visited lessons, we saw that pupils' attitudes to learning are extremely positive. Pupils of different abilities and pupils who have a special educational need (SEN) and/or disabilities are equally challenged and engaged. In each class, pupils were engrossed in their work and often engaged in thoughtful discussions between themselves and with adults. Teachers asked hard questions and pupils were thinking through their answers and correcting themselves if they went wrong. For example, we observed Year 1 tackling a division problem. They explained to the teacher what they had done and why. They listened to her questions and quickly corrected an error, taking great delight in having worked the problem out successfully.
- Pupils are developing strong reading skills. When I listened to pupils read, younger pupils used their phonics skills effectively to sound out unfamiliar words. Year 6 pupils talked animatedly about their reading and told me how teachers encourage them to read a variety of texts including poetry, newspapers and non-fiction.
- Children in the early years are developing strong basic skills. Your decision to open the provision for two-year olds has been a success, especially in improving their spoken language. Children are developing an increasingly strong vocabulary. Adults are highly successful in spotting opportunities to extend children's skills through Nursery and into Reception. We observed boys and girls contributing excitedly to writing on a large piece of paper spread across the

classroom to make a floor story. The teacher helped the children to think of alternative words for 'big', and this stimulated the children to use a wider vocabulary.

- The environment in the early years base is thoughtfully set up to encourage children to experiment with a range of materials and activities. The children use the resources independently and they are developing confidence and good relationships. However, we noted that this is not as strong outdoors, and there are fewer opportunities for children to consolidate their learning in the outdoor area.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers' assessment of pupils' work in foundation subjects matches their effective practice in reading, writing and mathematics so that pupils make equally strong progress
- the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is reduced so that it is closer to the national average
- the early years outside area is used more effectively to support children's learning.

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

Joan Hewitt
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you and other senior and middle leaders and the chair of the governing body. I held telephone calls with a representative of the local authority and the school's improvement partner. I visited lessons with you and the assistant headteacher. I looked at pupils' work with leaders and spoke informally with pupils. I listened to five pupils read. I looked at the results from Parent View (Ofsted's online questionnaire) and considered the 34 responses to it, including the 18 written comments. I evaluated the responses of 24 staff and 44 pupils to Ofsted's surveys. I also took account of the school's own surveys of staff, parents' and pupils' views. I examined a range of documents, including information about safeguarding, the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan.