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Mrs Emma Blackburn
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Dear Mrs Blackburn

Short inspection of Northumberland Pupil Referral Unit

Following my visit to the school on 27 March 2019 with Paul Barton, Ofsted Inspector, 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 June 2015.

Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I have identified some priorities for improvement which I advise the school to address. In light of these priorities, the school's next inspection will be a full section 5 inspection. **There is no change to the school's current overall effectiveness grade of good as a result of this inspection.**

Yours is a school that is undergoing significant turbulence in leadership. The substantive headteacher is not currently in school and the additional external support that you were receiving from an experienced school leader has come to an end. You are currently 'steady the ship' until an experienced headteacher starts a fixed-term contract after Easter. Similarly, the profile of teaching staff is fragile. Some teachers are either on fixed-term contracts or seconded to the school. Members of the management committee and officers from the local authority have been proactive in offering support and practical solutions to the current instability in leadership. Nonetheless, the current leadership structure at school, and roles and responsibilities, are unclear. There is no special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) in school at the moment, for example.

You have been effective in keeping members of staff focused on the day-to-day running of the school. For example, in spite of the turbulence, pupils are calm and focused in lessons in the secondary phase of the school. Here, teachers know the standards at which pupils are working and ensure that the work that they are given is not too difficult. As a result, most pupils do not give up on their work. Teaching assistants work well with pupils to offer them individual support, and 'nudge' them

forward in their learning. The secondary pupils that inspectors talked to were positive about their experiences of school. However, sometimes the activities and tasks that teachers plan for pupils are too easy for the most able pupils.

Some pupils in the primary phase have significant special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in addition to their behavioural needs. You, and members of the management committee, confirmed that the cohort of pupils at school has changed. In response to this, you have ensured that additional support and therapies are available to help these pupils to focus on their learning. This has had some positive impact, but there is still a way to go to ensure that pupils are calm and ready to learn in some primary classrooms.

The systems that you have put in place to monitor the quality of education at school are strong. Members of staff appreciate the advice that you give to help them to improve their planning or how best to teach lessons. You use information about the progress that pupils are making and the standards that they are reaching wisely to further shape the programmes or interventions that you put into place. You ensure that training offered to members of staff focuses on teaching, learning and assessment, in addition to issues linked to behaviour and safeguarding.

There has been a change in the way that extreme behaviours are managed at school. In the past, the number of incidents where pupils needed to be guided physically for their own safety and that of others was high. You changed the way in which staff were expected to deal with these more complex behaviours and directed staff to use physical intervention less often. At the time, however, this was not well communicated to pupils, and the number of violent incidents increased. Over time, however, the school has become calmer. You, and members of the management committee, are monitoring this situation. You know that policies relating to physical intervention need to result in an improvement in pupils' behaviour without leading to situations where leaders are out of control of pupil discipline.

Members of staff that we spoke to told us that 'it has been a difficult year'. However, they also underlined that the net result of the changes to the behaviour policy is positive. Teachers that we spoke to were highly committed to the school and to the pupils in their care. They are 'up for the challenge' that working in a pupil referral unit can bring. They were complimentary about the way in which you are managing a difficult situation.

You are not complacent and want the quality of education on offer to be better. However, recent turbulence in staffing and leadership has led to a lack of stability at school. Although you have been focused on improving the school, and in addressing the areas for improvement as cited in the previous inspection report, there are now additional priorities that I advise school leaders and members of the management committee to address.

Safeguarding is effective.

Your colleague with responsibility for safeguarding has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. She has ensured that staff have received the latest required safeguarding training. You are aware that several of your pupils are more vulnerable than most. Your communication with outside services is strong and you are tenacious in making sure that pupils receive the support that they require. Paperwork is well ordered and up to date.

You have thought deeply about some of the additional needs that your pupils have in relation to safeguarding. An example of this is the calendar of 'hot topics' that identifies potential safeguarding hotspots. You then tackle these within the curriculum. You use Halloween as a hook to discuss the need to be vigilant around strangers, for example. You use Guy Fawkes night to discuss the dangers of fireworks.

Pupils arrive to school safely and leave in an orderly fashion. You have ensured that there are additional risk assessments in place to support the behaviour of individual pupils and have a keen eye for health and safety arrangements. Paperwork linked to the use of physical intervention is now watertight and includes the opportunity to reflect on the reasons for its use.

You are aware that some pupils have additional emotional or mental health needs. You have made sure that programmes are in place to help these pupils to deal with some of their needs or past experiences. In the primary phase, inspectors observed teachers engaging pupils in a variety of activities and helping them to succeed at what they were doing. This pastoral approach was having a positive impact on their levels of concentration. Using the context of castles and knights, teachers helped individual pupils to focus on their specific behavioural needs and rewarded them when they were successful. This strategy, among others, is increasingly successful, although there is still work to do in helping pupils in the primary phase focus more on their learning.

Rates of attendance are improving. In addition, the proportion of pupils that is persistently absent is decreasing. This is due, in part, to the work of those colleagues responsible for attendance at school. School policies, staff training and curriculum coverage all help to ensure that pupils are safe at school.

Inspection findings

- As part of the inspection I wanted to find out whether the school has maintained its many strengths since the last time it was inspected. Although some strengths in the quality of teaching and in the curriculum are evident, I also have areas of concern. I note that the school was originally developed to support pupils with behavioural needs for up to 20 weeks. After that time, having had intensive support for their behaviour, pupils were supposed to return to their home school. Over the past two years, few pupils have returned to their home school. Many pupils have arrived in the primary phase with SEND in addition to behavioural

needs. The core purpose of the school is not clear. This makes it difficult for leaders to plan for teaching, staffing and improvements accordingly.

- I also wanted to know how effective transition arrangements are. You and your staff have the well-being of pupils at the heart of transition processes. When new pupils arrive, you spend time with them so that they understand how the school works, and so that they get used to their new surroundings. You take information from the pupils' home schools and do some additional tests to ensure that the work that you give the pupils matches their needs and interests. This is, in the main, successful, although the work provided for some most-able pupils is too simple. Overall, pupils settle in quickly, and other pupils make them feel welcome.
- You and your staff try hard to make sure that the curriculum is interesting and relevant. For example, when you plan topics for pupils in the primary phase, these include 'hooks' of visits and other interesting activities to help to engage the pupils. In the secondary phase you offer a variety of subjects, including sport, art, design and technology and swimming. Pupils that spoke with inspectors appreciated the variety of subjects that they studied.
- In order to track the progress that pupils are making, teachers use banks of statements linked to age-related expectations as a basis for their assessments. These are primarily used in English and mathematics. Teachers use these consistently and effectively. By collecting this information, you can see which pupils are making slower progress from their starting points, and you can then give additional support if this is needed. Although pupils are making progress, the level of attainment for many remains too low, including in English and mathematics.
- You offer a range of programmes to support pupils' needs. During the school day for pupils in the secondary phase, 'coaching' sessions are used for therapies, academic support or 'one-to-one' discussions. When you note specific gaps in knowledge, you plan to address these. For example, you support pupils with their phonics knowledge if they struggle to read accurately or fluently. You attempt to 'wrap the curriculum and timetable' around individual pupils to help them to make progress in their learning.
- One of my lines of questioning was linked to pupils with SEND. I wanted to know how well these pupils are supported in school, and if teaching matches their needs. There is currently no SENCo at school. This is having a negative impact on the extent to which teachers are given information that helps them to meet the needs of individuals in their classes. During the meetings that you have with teaching staff to check pupil progress, you consider pupils with SEND among other groups of pupils. However, there is currently a lack of structured approach to identifying and meeting the needs of these pupils.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the leadership structure of the school is secure, and that roles and responsibilities

are clarified

- the profile of teaching staff is more stable
- the role of the SENCo is administered effectively and that there is a structured approach to identifying and meeting the needs of pupils with SEND
- teaching matches the needs and abilities of the most able pupils more closely
- additional support and therapies help pupils to focus on their learning more effectively, particularly in the primary phase
- the number of incidents where pupils need to be guided physically for safety reasons is monitored so that it improves pupils' behaviour without leading to situations where leaders are out of control of pupil discipline
- the standards that pupils reach in English and mathematics continue to rise
- the core purpose of the school is established, so that preparations for further improvement can be more effective.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Wardle
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, inspectors met with the assistant headteacher and the designated safeguarding leader, who is also a member of the senior leadership team. We spoke with two members of the management committee, including the chair. An inspector also spoke with a school improvement partner and a senior representative from the local authority. Inspectors met with a group of teachers.

We observed teaching and learning across the school with the assistant headteacher. We reviewed pupils' work from different year groups and from a variety of subjects. Inspectors talked to two small groups of pupils, one from the primary phase and one from the secondary phase. We observed pupils in lessons and during unstructured times. You presented the school development plan, the school's self-evaluation document, records of lesson observations carried out by senior leaders and information detailing pupils' progress and attainment. Other documents were considered, including those relating to safeguarding and policies on the school's website.

I considered the 10 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire. One parent responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, and free-text comments

from this response were also considered.