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Mr Colin Lofthouse
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Dear Mr Lofthouse

Short inspection of Rickleton Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 20 November 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 September 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Your high expectations and vision are evident throughout the school. Leaders are committed, focused and effective. As a result, pupils achieve well, morale is high, and parents and carers have great confidence in the school's work. Your relentless determination is compelling. You have created and developed a strong team of leaders whose members share your passion for the school and your commitment to ensure that every pupil, as you stated in our meeting, 'leaves with a great set of learning skills'.

Rickleton Primary School is an open, welcoming and friendly school. Pupils are engaged in, and excited by, their learning. On the day of the inspection, there was a real buzz in the school as the Year 2 pupils were searching for clues following the news that you had been kidnapped by a witch. Various clues, from your coffee cup and coat to a witch's hat, left the pupils intrigued. Older pupils were keen to tell me that when they were in Year 1, a meteor crashed onto the school yard. These 'learning hooks', as you call them, capture the pupils' imagination and encourage them to learn. This excitement about learning was clearly evident throughout the day.

Leaders, including governors, have an uncompromising determination to raise standards. They have an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Leaders gather and evaluate a wide range of information to ensure that they can focus on the right priorities and address any issues.

At the time of the previous inspection, leaders were asked to improve the clarity and precision of teachers' questioning, so that it makes a difference to the learning of all pupils. Leaders have provided teachers with focused training and professional development to improve their work in this area. The results of this training are notable. Teachers use incisive questioning to challenge pupils' thinking and support their learning. Pupils, in turn, ask pertinent questions of each other. As a result, pupils are able to develop their thinking and deepen their understanding of the topics that they study. For example, in a Year 3 history lesson that we visited, pupils were captivated by the wide variety of resources about the Stone Age. They asked searching questions about the artefacts and challenged each other's conclusions about how useful each item was to a historian.

Leaders were also asked to ensure that planning caters for pupils of all abilities to enable them all to make at least good progress. You have equipped teachers to be what you refer to as 'adaptive practitioners'. Regular, high-quality conversations take place between teachers following the opportunities you give them to observe learning in other classes. These 'lesson studies' give teachers the chance to discuss the progress of individual pupils and to share ideas about how to improve teaching. As a result of this, teachers are more readily able to meet the needs of individual pupils. However, in 2018, the number of Year 6 pupils achieving at the higher standard in reading and mathematics was lower than the provisional national average. As a result, leaders recognise that more work to support your most able pupils is needed.

Pupils say that most children in the school follow your 'golden rules'. They are very clear about your high expectations for behaviour. Pupils are kind and helpful. They listen well to others and are aware of other's needs. At playtime, my Year 2 guides were most concerned about you: one said, 'I hope Mr Lofthouse is all right. He has been kidnapped you know!'. Pupils and staff have a sense of belonging and take great pride in their school.

Governors are a capable team who are committed to the school. They share your ambitions for every pupil. Governors provide you with an appropriate balance of challenge and support. As the membership of the governing body has changed, new members have been chosen carefully, so that they have suitable skills to strengthen and complement the team. As a result, governance is strong.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders are diligent and vigilant in acting to keep pupils safe. Leaders have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are appropriate and fit for purpose. You have made sure that staff are acutely aware of the school's procedures and your expectations for the care of your pupils. Consequently, there is an evident culture of safeguarding at the school.

You and your governing body ensure that the school meets requirements for the recruitment and appointment of staff. Your training for staff, governors and volunteers is very effective in ensuring that adults know how and when to raise

concerns. Leaders make certain that safeguarding documentation is accurate and thorough. You are not afraid to challenge other professionals to make certain that the appropriate care and support are given to vulnerable pupils. Supported by your governors, you have taken steps to meet the social, emotional and mental health needs of your pupils effectively.

Pupils are aware that bullying can take place, but they state that this 'hardly ever happens'. Moreover, they are confident that if it were to occur, teachers will deal with it quickly and effectively. Pupils also told me that they are taught how to stay safe in a range of situations, including online.

Inspection findings

- Pupils in the school are happy and successful. They enjoy coming to school and work well together, supporting each other with their learning. Consequently, their overall attendance rates are above the national average and the number of pupils who are persistently absent from school is very small. Even so, leaders are not complacent, and you have employed a parent support adviser to work with parents and families to make sure that their children attend regularly.
- Parents greatly appreciate that their children are known and valued as individuals. Parents are very supportive and say that their children are happy to come to school. Parents spoken to during the inspection and those who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, were very positive about the school. Comments included, 'Rickleton Primary School really is an excellent school. The leadership demonstrated from Mr Lofthouse and Mrs Price is outstanding. Always time for everyone and anyone.' Another parent said, 'I am so grateful to all the staff who have helped my daughter during her time at Rickleton. Reception seems like five minutes ago – now we are preparing her for "big" school. The opportunity Rickleton has provided for our daughter has set her up for her future.' One parent summarised the sentiments of many others in saying, 'I couldn't have chosen a better school'.
- Leaders, including the special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), have a detailed understanding of the needs of those pupils who need additional or different support with their learning. They provide specific, focused information to teachers, so that they are able to adapt the learning in the classroom to meet pupils' needs in a personalised way. As a result, pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are making good progress towards their personal targets.
- Leaders have a detailed understanding of the different barriers to learning faced by disadvantaged pupils in the school. Teachers plan effectively for disadvantaged pupils, carefully considering their pastoral as well as their academic needs. You are committed to ensuring that all pupils are ready to learn. Pastoral support structures are strong. The engagement of a parent support adviser and therapist is indicative of this. Teachers have become more precise in their approach to identifying specific gaps in learning. Interventions are sharply focused on what needs to be reviewed and practised. You make excellent use of teaching assistants and volunteers. The commitment of your volunteers in

listening to pupils read on a regular basis is laudable. However, published data shows that the progress of disadvantaged pupils is variable and is regularly lower than that of their classmates.

- There was a bustle of purposeful activity when we visited the Nursery and Reception classes. The three-year-old children in Nursery were completely absorbed as they played with water and sand-based activities. They were able to count a number of objects and identify basic colours. Teaching staff take every opportunity to engage children in conversation and to extend their vocabulary. Teachers actively support children's social development, encouraging them to share and take turns.
- The effective teaching of phonics in early years means that typically children make a good start in developing their literacy skills. The systematic approach adopted helps the children to master early reading skills. In the Year 1 class, adults effectively modelled how the sounds are conveyed to writing. This enabled the pupils to explore differences between written words with the same sounds – 'ee' and 'ea', for example. Despite this, the proportion of children who achieved the expected standard in the phonics screening check in 2018 was considerably lower than it has been historically.
- The teaching of writing is a clear strength of the school. Your approach is inspired, and designed to meet the needs of individual pupils. They write creatively and with flair in a wide range of contexts. Pupils talk about how their 'vocabulary ninja bookmarks' and their 'writing toolkits' help them to structure and develop their work. Leaders are keen to explore new and innovative ways to engage and encourage writing, especially for boys. In a Year 6 history lesson that we visited, pupils were demonstrating their ability to switch between formal and informal styles of writing. The pupils carefully planned their work and listened to other pupils' ideas about the best way to structure a newspaper article. Your consistent and systematic approach is enabling pupils to develop their writing skills quickly.
- Leaders have ensured that the curriculum is innovative, interesting and well balanced. As a result, pupils' levels of engagement are high, and they take great pride in their work. Your commitment to providing pupils with, as you say, a 'broad set of learning skills' means that they are ready for the challenge of secondary school by the end of Year 6. Pupils enjoy the chance to reflect on their learning and to improve their responses. One pupil told me, 'At this school, we learn from our mistakes.' As a result, pupils are unfazed by new learning and keen to explore new ideas.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- the variability in progress between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged classmates continues to reduce
- phonics is taught well across the school, so that the proportion of pupils achieving the expected standard at the end of Year 1 increases

- teachers provide consistently high levels of challenge for the most able pupils, so that a greater proportion of these pupils are able to achieve the higher standard at the end of key stage 2.

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

Yours sincerely

Daniel Murray
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection, I met with you, your deputy headteacher and five governors, including the chair of the governing body. I also met with your SENCos and your leaders of mathematics, English and early years. Together, you and I visited classrooms to observe teaching and to look at pupils' work. I also looked in depth at pupils' workbooks and other work. I spoke with a representative of the local authority by telephone. I also spoke to the headteacher of the local pupil referral unit. I met with a group of eight pupils from Years 3 to 6. I listened to eight pupils read. I also listened informally to pupils reading aloud during my visits to lessons.

Consideration was given to the 84 free-text responses to Parent View, and the 21 questionnaire responses from staff. Consideration was also given to the 68 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire. I spoke to several parents and grandparents at the start of the school day.

I evaluated recent information in relation to pupils' progress throughout the school, the school's self-evaluation document and the school improvement plan. I also met with you as designated safeguarding leader and reviewed documentation and records about how you keep your pupils safe.