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Mrs Chris Riley
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Riley

Short inspection of Gainford CofE Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 22 May 2019, 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 2015.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school. You and your team, supported by governors, have made sure that the areas for improvement highlighted at the previous inspection have been actioned. You have also made sure that the strengths of the school have continued to develop.

Pupils' behaviour and personal development continue to be very strong. Their attitudes to learning are a substantial factor in supporting them to make good progress across a range of subjects. Pupils continue to enjoy a wide array of enrichment and clubs which capture their interests and help them to develop healthy minds and lifestyles.

At the previous inspection, the school was asked to implement the new assessment system, which was at an early stage of development at the time. An accurate assessment system is now in place. It is well understood by staff and applied fairly consistently. Teachers and leaders use it as an effective tool to understand how well pupils are doing and to identify when a pupil is at risk of underachieving. As soon as you and your teachers become aware of any slippage, pupils benefit from targeted teaching in small groups to help them catch up quickly.

Teaching continues to be strong but there are still a few inconsistencies. Teachers plan to meet the needs of most pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, well. However, they are less successful in adapting their teaching to meet the needs of the most able pupils, particularly in writing and mathematics.

Governors continue to serve the school well, providing a sharp challenge as well as maintaining a high level of support for leaders. Leaders and governors understand the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Leaders' evaluations of the quality of the school's work and development planning accurately identify the correct priorities. However, plans lack specific interim checks on the school's progress towards the targets you have set. As a result, while you and your governors can see that improvements have been made, you cannot be precise in evaluating if there has been enough improvement to keep the school on track.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Staff understand their responsibilities and know how and to whom they should report any concerns that a child may be at risk of harm. You have made sure that your own training and that of staff and governors is up to date. Teachers understand the importance of recording even minor concerns so that you can identify any emerging patterns or trends.

Pupils understand how to keep themselves safe in a variety of contexts, including keeping themselves safe online and near roads. Parents and carers are also supported in understanding risks through helpful links on the website and advice about parental controls to keep their children safe when using the internet or social media.

The number of pupils who are persistently absent from school has reduced markedly as a result of careful work with individual families.

Inspection findings

- During the inspection, I wanted to find out if the curriculum is meeting the needs of boys and the most able pupils. I wanted to know if their writing skills are strong across all subjects and if they are developing a rich vocabulary and broad general knowledge. You and your team have made sure that boys have exciting things to write about. For example, the extended writing pupils produced after a visit to a residential activity centre was lively and interesting. When I looked at pupils' books, I could see that boys' writing is improving. They are developing more stamina so that they can write at length more often, and for different purposes.
- Your team's recent strategy to encourage pupils to use adventurous vocabulary is showing early signs of success. The most able pupils are becoming more confident in finding out what new words mean and attempting to use them in their writing. This approach is at an early stage. Currently, teachers are not precise in identifying and planning for what they should expect the most able pupils to be able to do, know and understand across all subjects.
- Leaders have recently reviewed the curriculum and identified that the work pupils were doing in their topic work was not developing pupils' specific subject skills well enough. Work has begun to ensure that pupils' skills in subjects such as geography and history improve progressively over their time at the school.

However, leaders have paid less attention to ensuring that pupils' cross-curricular skills, such as reasoning and investigation, are developed systematically across different subjects.

- During the inspection, I also wanted to know if pupils and children in the early years were developing strong phonics and mathematics skills. Children get off to a strong start in developing their understanding of numbers in the early years. This carries on into key stage 1 and pupils become increasingly confident in problem-solving and offering reasons for their answers. When I visited lessons, I observed pupils in Year 1 solving money problems, working out which combination of coins to use to pay for their 'shopping'. This challenging task helped them to use their mental arithmetic skills to solve the problem.
- Leaders have made a concerted effort to improve the teaching of phonics and this has been successful to a degree. Children are confident in sounding out words. They enjoy learning new sounds, but they do not consistently pronounce them accurately. This is because the quality of phonics teaching is not of a consistently high quality and new sounds are not always modelled effectively by the teacher. That said, because of improved teaching, many more children are currently on track to reach a good level of development than in previous years.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- leaders' planning for the progression of pupils' skills and knowledge is precise across different subjects, especially for the most able
- plans for school improvement are sharpened so that leaders can measure the extent of improvements at interim checks
- the quality and consistency of the teaching of phonics is improved.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Durham, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Durham. 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 three members of the governing body. I also met with a representative of the local authority and the diocese. I visited lessons with you, and I looked at pupils' work. I spoke informally with pupils and I heard two pupils read. I looked at the results from Parent View, Ofsted's online questionnaire, and considered 19 responses, including 12 written

comments. I spoke with parents on the playground before school started. I also took account of the school's own surveys of parents' views. I examined a range of documents, including information about safeguarding, the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan.