

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Dr Richard Beadnall
Headteacher
Levendale Primary School
Mount Leven Road
Yarm
North Yorkshire
TS15 9RJ

Dear Dr Beadnall

Short inspection of Levendale Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 26 September 2017, 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 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Following your promotion to headteacher in September 2014, you quickly secured the appointment of a strong deputy headteacher, who has supported you well in your successful drive for continued improvement. Together, you make an effective senior leadership team with an accurate understanding of what the school does well and what it needs to improve. For example, you acknowledge that as a result of some significant staffing changes in Reception and Year 1, pupils' outcomes in the phonic screening check in summer 2017 were below those expected nationally. You have already secured additional training for staff and are looking across the cluster of local schools for good practice to help improve the quality of teaching in this area.

Your underpinning ethos is in developing the whole child academically, socially and emotionally. This strong set of values steers the school's curriculum well and nurtures the strong sense of 'family' within the school. Parents value greatly the time taken by your staff to get to know and appreciate their child's needs. Every pupil is treated as the special individual they are and this reflects your strong and effective commitment to inclusion. You are to be commended for your steadfastness in seeking the right advice and support for your most vulnerable pupils. In 2016, you used fixed-term exclusions occasionally. Despite this, the longer term actions taken by leaders demonstrate their commitment to supporting the most vulnerable pupils, resulting in a good reduction this year. Support for these pupils, particularly those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, is ensuring that they

are helped to achieve well in their learning. Consequently, their progress in reading, writing and mathematics is good.

Pupils' behaviour is conducive to the calm and orderly atmosphere in school. Pupils in all year groups demonstrate excellent attitudes to their learning and exemplary manners, and they offer broad smiles and a warm welcome to visitors. In all classes, pupils are keen to share their learning and talk with enthusiasm about the many opportunities they receive and their high aspirations for the future. Pupils talk eloquently about those of other faiths and beliefs and demonstrate tolerant and respectful attitudes to others. This is the result of your carefully crafted approach to pupils' personal development. One of the older pupils shared how easy it was to be a new starter at the school: 'There were bundles of people asking me to join their games and be their friend.' Parents, who overwhelmingly say that their children are happy and well cared for, endorse this view.

Children enter Nursery demonstrating skills that are typical for their age and stage of development. As a result of effective transition arrangements and strong relationships, children quickly settle into Nursery and make good gains in their learning from their starting points. Historically, fewer children achieve the standard in writing, and in 2017 this affected the overall proportion of children reaching a good level of development at the end of Reception, which dipped slightly. This was in contrast to the year-on-year improvements previously achieved. Without making excuses, you acknowledge that the absence of experienced members of staff contributed to this. You were rightly disappointed and have already organised additional individual support to ensure that pupils quickly make up ground in their learning. It is too early in the academic year to determine the impact of this measure. However, work seen in pupils' books within Year 1 indicates that they are working at an appropriate level for their age and in accordance with national curriculum expectations.

You have ensured that by the time pupils leave Levendale Primary School, their outcomes remain good. Pupils of all abilities, including disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, make good progress from their starting points. Overall standards are above the national average in reading, writing and mathematics and pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education and transfer into secondary school.

Following your appointment as headteacher, you focused your efforts on tackling the remaining areas of improvement identified at the last inspection. You and your senior leaders reviewed the organisation of the English curriculum taught in school and examined in detail pupils' outcomes to identify your priorities. The results of your actions have led to an established and successful approach to the teaching of writing. It emphasises the importance of writing to an audience and writing for a purpose. At the end of each teaching sequence, pupils complete a final assessed piece of writing. As a result, by the end of the academic year, pupils have experienced writing in a range of styles in a range of subjects, with some success. For example, during the inspection, pupils in Year 5 were writing good explanations in their English lesson because they were linking the work they were doing about

the water cycle in science and geography to their literacy skills. This approach is now embedded practice and is ensuring that by the end of key stage 2, pupils' outcomes in writing are above the national average and more closely in line with those in reading and mathematics. Provisional summer 2017 outcomes for Year 6 indicate that pupils' progress has strengthened.

You have established high expectations regarding the quality of pupils' presentation of work and tackled the previous variations in the quality of pupils' handwriting successfully. This has led to pupils taking great pride in the presentation of their work in all subjects, which is exemplary.

Leaders, including governors, are proactively seeking ways of securing a financially viable future. You have applied due diligence in your consideration of academy conversion and considered carefully the various options available to you. You are outward facing and value greatly the strong partnerships you have established with your colleagues from other schools. This is ensuring that the school is well placed to continue your drive for further improvements while retaining your distinct ethos and values.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders, including governors, have ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed. Recruitment procedures are carefully considered and follow local authority recommendations to ensure that those who work with pupils in the school are fit to do so. Staff are trained regularly in all aspects of safeguarding and are fully aware of the role they play in keeping pupils safe. Leaders ensure that policies are kept up to date with the most recent legislation.

You are vigilant in ensuring that the maintenance of the school's buildings and grounds is to a high standard. You use some of the school budget judiciously to pay for additional local authority checks to ensure full health and safety assurance.

You take prompt action in referring any safeguarding concerns to appropriate agencies and have developed strong partnerships with these agencies to secure any necessary support.

Pupils say that they feel safe in school and they have the utmost faith that should an incident occur, there would be a trusted adult in whom they can confide. Parents endorsed this view.

Inspection findings

- Historically, there has been greater variance in pupils' achievement in writing compared with that in reading and mathematics, particularly at the higher standard. As part of the inspection, I wanted to find out the reasons for this. You have worked hard to engage pupils to want to write and frequently use high-quality novels as a stimulus. Coupled with the introduction of discrete lessons for

spelling, grammar and punctuation, this is securing pupils' confidence to write successfully with accuracy and enthusiasm in a range of styles. For example, pupils in Year 6 were excited to express their characters' moods by using formal and non-formal speech. This activity really made the pupils think hard about what they knew in order to apply their skills effectively for the reader. However, this level of challenge is not a consistent feature in teachers' planning in order to move pupils on quickly from what they know and understand.

- I also wanted to examine writing in early years. Here children are encouraged to write in a joined script. They use their early phonic knowledge to attempt to write words successfully. For example, children in Reception were using joined handwriting to write their names, sounding out the letters they knew well. Teacher-led sessions are developing children's early writing skills successfully, but there are few opportunities for children to 'mark make' in free-choice activities both inside and in the outdoor environment. You are working with the leader of early years and the local authority to implement focused plans for improvement.
- Another focus for the inspection was to review the effectiveness of teaching in phonics and find out why outcomes had dipped below the national average in 2016. Although all staff follow the same phonics programme, there are inconsistencies in the organisation and delivery of these sessions. This means that some pupils are not acquiring new sounds as quickly as they need to. While staffing turbulence undoubtedly accounted in part for the dip in outcomes, there is still more to do to ensure that more pupils achieve highly in phonics. You have identified phonics teaching as a priority for improvement and have already organised refresher training and support for teachers.
- The number of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is so low in each year group, it is difficult to assess trends in their achievements compared with those found nationally over time. However, because of the individualised work and support for pupils who need extra help in their learning, they achieve as well as their peers.
- My final focus was to review the effectiveness of leadership. You have tackled the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection effectively. Through careful and regular analysis of pupils' assessment outcomes, you ensure that you have identified the right priorities for continuous improvement. Your improvement plans are highly detailed and involve the wider leadership team. They sit within a strategic plan that sets out the long-term vision for the school. However, the targets you set within these plans are not linked to raising pupils' achievement precisely enough. This makes it difficult to enable other leaders and governors to accurately evaluate the impact of the actions determined.
- Governors bring a range of skills and experiences to their role and ensure that any additional government funding is well spent. Together, you are looking towards the future and providing a clear direction to the school in order to continue to drive the school to be the best it can be.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- improvement plans are linked more precisely to specific targets for improvements in pupils' achievement
- activities planned by teachers challenge pupils to think hard about their writing
- there is an increase in opportunities within early years for children to 'mark make', particularly within free-choice activities
- phonics sessions consistently move pupils on to learning new sounds when they need to.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Buckle

Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

I met with you to discuss the impact of actions you are taking to continue to improve the school and to discuss safeguarding arrangements. We observed learning together in all classes and talked to pupils about their learning. I also held meetings with three governors, including the chair of governors, and held a telephone conversation with the local authority's senior adviser. I talked to pupils in classes and around school and listened to eight pupils read. I reviewed the provisional summer 2017 results in national assessment tests of children in early years, and pupils in Year 1, the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2. I also checked the assessment information of all other year groups, and groups of pupils for the last academic year. Account was taken of the 38 responses to Ofsted's pupil survey, the eight responses from the staff survey and the 51 responses to Ofsted's parent and carer questionnaire, Parent View. A number of documents were scrutinised. These included a range of safeguarding documents, the school's written evaluation of its work and the school improvement plan. I also reviewed your recent headteacher's reports to governors and minutes from recent full governing body meetings and committee meetings.