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Mrs M Phizacklea
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Dear Mrs Phizacklea

Short inspection of Vickerstown School

Following my visit to the school on 14 November 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 March 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. You have established a strong team of senior leaders who have supported a steady improvement in the school over the last three years. You are backed by knowledgeable governors who provide appropriate support and effective challenge to ensure that the school is continually improving. The culture of the school is based around pupils' individual needs and all staff are on board with this.

The purpose-built school has been constructed around a central area known as the 'learning street', which acts as a hub of activity. It epitomises the atmosphere in school. It is lively and filled with purposeful energy. Pupils are welcomed into school by friendly staff who have excellent relationships with pupils. Pupils feel secure and settled in the school; their classrooms are a haven of calm. Parents who responded to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, all agree that their children are well looked after and kept safe.

Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are supported effectively. The school works closely with other agencies to integrate these pupils into classes. The reputation of the school for supporting pupils who have special needs and/or disabilities is becoming known in the community. As a result, the number of pupils at the school has increased since the last inspection because parents believe that the school meets pupils' needs.

You have ensured that effective action has taken place since the previous inspection. As a

result, the school has grown in many aspects. The first area inspectors asked leaders to improve was for pupils to make greater progress in lessons by being more active in their learning. Teachers now set interesting tasks to engage pupils. Pupils appreciate the examples that teachers provide as a model of good practice before pupils start their work. This ensures that pupils are clear about what is expected of them. This approach has led to pupils checking and improving their own work.

The last inspection identified the need to simplify your systems to check on pupils' progress. You have introduced systems to track pupils' individual achievements so that their progress is more easily measured. The results of your actions have led to steady improvements across the school. This is due to the way in which pupils are identified for additional support, particularly those at risk of falling behind. In the early years and at the end of key stage 1, standards are improving towards meeting national averages. Results in the Year 1 phonics screening check exceed the national average and by the end of key stage 2, pupils' good progress ensures that they achieve high standards in reading and mathematics.

Leaders and governors share an ambitious vision for pupils at the school. They are keen to drive the school to improve even further. We agreed that, arising out of this inspection, the development of middle leaders and the challenge for some of the most able pupils in writing and science are areas for leaders to improve upon.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose and records are detailed and of high quality. Safeguarding in the school is highly effective. Your awareness as safeguarding leader is exceptional. You have prioritised training for staff based on local risks to pupils. This has resulted in a culture of exceptional vigilance. Your knowledgeable staff understand the potential risks to pupils. Any concerns are acted swiftly upon.

You lead well on a comprehensive range of safeguarding activities that make pupils aware of dangers and risks. The result is that pupils are well informed about how to act when they feel unsafe, particularly when online. Governors say that this is a growing issue for the school. Leaders and governors are keen to continue to ensure that their approach remains robust. Pupils clearly understand the steps to take to ensure that they are safe when online.

Pupils feel safe because of the priority that leaders put on their well-being. The school counsellor is highly effective in ensuring that pupils feel secure. She engages a wide range of parents and pupils as part of her role to support the school community with their social, emotional and mental health. This support helps pupils to understand their own feelings. For example, pupils speak highly of the bereavement counselling that is available. As one pupil said, 'I feel reassured that I can speak to someone at any time.'

Inspection findings

- As part of the inspection, we agreed on a number of key lines of enquiry. The first was to look at how effectively children are supported to make progress in writing in the early years. Some children enter the school with language skills that are below those

typical of their age. Leaders and governors have recently established an onsite nursery to help raise the skills of children as they prepare for the Reception Year. The early years leader is driven to ensure that children receive the best possible education. She is raising aspirations for children's achievement. Children say that adults make learning fun and challenging. The environment successfully supports the development of children's fine motor control. There is a clear focus on developing children's spoken language to feed into improving children's written work. There is also a range of activities for children to practise their writing. Children make good progress in writing because the range of activities support their development of their basic writing skills. Adults question children effectively. They are aware of the standards that children need to reach to be ready for Year 1. Effective teaching over the last two years has ensured that the number of children achieving a good level of development by the end of their Reception Year has risen dramatically from 2015.

- We also agreed to look at how effectively pupils are supported to improve their skills in science. The work in pupils' books shows that pupils' scientific knowledge and vocabulary is developed successfully. The science leader has successfully introduced the new curriculum content across the school. Pupils conduct investigations to practise their practical science skills. Pupils see science as a fun, engaging subject. Pupils in key stage 2 achieve well and achieve standards that are broadly in line with the national average by the end of Year 6. Yet the work in pupils' books shows that too few pupils are challenged to extend their practical skills even further, especially the most able pupils. The science leader is knowledgeable about the curriculum. However, we agreed that the opportunities for all middle leaders to have an impact on their areas of responsibility is limited, particularly in writing and science. This is due to a lack of development for middle leaders. We also agreed that there is a lack of dedicated time for leaders to support staff in developing further challenge within the curriculum, particularly for the most able pupils.
- Finally, we agreed to look at how well leaders are improving boys' writing in key stage 1. Leaders and governors have identified this as a priority in their plans to improve the school. They ensure that the pupil premium funding successfully targets disadvantaged boys' writing. The work in pupils' books shows that pupils make steady progress. However, different groups of pupils all do similar work. We agreed that this is the reason for some of the most able pupils finding that their work could be more challenging. The English leader has a good grasp of his subject and understands the actions needed to improve writing in key stage 1. However, we agreed that more opportunities are needed for middle leaders to plan and implement an approach to consistently challenge the most able pupils in writing.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- middle leaders are provided with the time and leadership development to plan and implement improvements in the areas of their responsibility, particularly in writing and science
- the most able pupils are challenged to achieve even higher standards in their science and written work.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Bentham
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During the inspection I met with leaders and governors to discuss safeguarding and aspects of the school's leadership and management. Together, we visited classes in the early years, key stage 1 and upper key stage 2. I spoke to pupils informally about their work during lessons and heard them read their own and others' work as part of classroom activities. I reviewed documentation about safeguarding, which included the school's record of checks undertaken on newly appointed staff. I spoke with pupils about safeguarding, behaviour and their writing and science work. I conducted a scrutiny of pupils' writing and science work. I analysed minutes of governors' meetings; the school's evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses; and the school development plan. I took into account 13 responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, and 21 responses to the pupil survey.