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Mr Graeme Atkins  
Executive Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Atkins

### **Short inspection of Hexham Middle School**

Following my visit to the school on 24 April 2019 with Karen Gammack, Her Majesty's 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 your predecessor school was judged to be good in June 2016.

### **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 taken considered action to build leadership capacity across the school. You have established a senior team that combines an effective mixture of experienced colleagues working alongside new leaders, supporting improvement in a sustainable and dynamic manner. You have given middle leaders increased responsibility for leading change, monitoring standards and evaluating the effects of improvement strategies.

Your leadership team has worked with teachers to raise expectations and respond more purposefully to new curriculum demands. Your teams are working even more closely with their colleagues in first and high schools to moderate standards and create a coherent curriculum. These partnerships are helping to raise standards and leading to more demanding curriculum content across a wider range of subjects. Your team is becoming increasingly adept in helping pupils to meet the demands of the national curriculum. Standards of attainment are consistently well above those seen nationally at the end of key stage 2, although progress for some groups, such as disadvantaged pupils, has been more variable. You recognise this in your development plans and are effectively bringing in more focused support to improve pupils' progress.

Your capacity for success is underpinned by strong systems. You have developed clear processes to review the quality of teaching and the progress pupils make. Your teams carry out termly reviews of the work of each department and use findings

from these reviews to support ongoing improvement. Subject leaders and class teachers are completing detailed breakdowns of standards of teaching and pupils' progress. Your teachers are increasingly using joint planning to develop shared resources and to strengthen the curriculum. These actions are improving the quality of teaching, although some inconsistencies remain.

One of the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection was to ensure that the best teaching practice was shared more widely with colleagues. You have raised the profile of key subject leaders by placing them in whole-school leadership roles where they are more influential in sharing good practice. In addition, your team has intensified professional development opportunities and networking links with neighbouring schools. You are currently refining your assessment processes through participation in new research and development initiatives. Where this work is securely implemented, it is enabling pupils to significantly improve the quality of their work, although it is not used to consistent effect in all areas.

Your pastoral team know their pupils extremely well. They check attendance closely and support families where absence is more prevalent. Their actions support good levels of attendance for the majority of pupils. Your teachers promote positive behaviour, as reflected in the very good conduct and constructive attitudes that pupils display in lessons, assemblies and at social times. Rates of exclusion are low and leaders strive to ensure that pupils learn lessons from the rare instances when exclusions are used. Your pastoral team are receptive to pupils' well-being and are developing additional expertise in responding to pupils' emotional and mental health needs. Many pupils have benefited from the initiatives they have introduced.

Your work to raise standards and increase expectations is supported by your trustees. Their monitoring committees carry out regular checks on the school's work, reviewing work and talking to teachers and pupils to explore how well school priorities are being met. Trustees recognise those areas, such as the progress of disadvantaged pupils, that have not improved as rapidly as they would like. They have the expertise to hold leaders to account and use the insights of a school improvement partner to secure objective scrutiny of school performance. The additional layers of accountability provided by trustees add further capacity for ongoing improvement.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The leadership team has ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Leaders make thorough checks on the suitability of adults working at the school. School leaders undergo appropriate training to enable them to carry out their safeguarding responsibilities. They are represented on local safeguarding groups to maintain an up-to-date awareness of safeguarding issues. Staff show a good awareness of safeguarding procedures and the actions to take if they have any concerns over pupils' welfare. Leaders work with families and external agencies to support pupils' welfare. Leaders pursue concerns over pupils' welfare in a prompt and determined manner, although written records do not always fully reflect the actions they take.

The pupils who inspectors spoke with say that they feel safe in school and the vast majority of their parents and carers agree. Pupils say that bullying is rare and that staff are effective in addressing any instances of bullying. Pupils receive regular guidance on how to stay safe online. Leaders have developed positive links with local police who talk to children about some of the hazards they may face and the actions they can take to stay safe.

### **Inspection findings**

- Leaders are aware that in 2018 pupils in the middle of the ability range made weaker progress at the end of key stage 2 than those at the upper end of the ability range. As a result, teachers are carrying out more detailed analysis of gaps in the knowledge and skills that these pupils possess and are taking swifter action to address these. There is evidence that the proportions of middle-ability pupils reaching and exceeding expected standards are increasing. However, variability in the quality of teaching and assessment means that this picture of improving progress is not consistently sustained.
- Leaders are taking more intensive actions to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, who demonstrated a decline in progress at the end of key stage 2 in 2018. Leaders are now scrutinising the progress of disadvantaged pupils more rigorously and have set up a dedicated focus group to oversee their progress and attendance. They know their pupils well and are putting specific support in place to address gaps in knowledge, such as 'pre-learning' sessions, where pupils receive advanced teaching on topics. Senior leaders are raising staff expectations of what disadvantaged pupils can achieve by sharing examples of the high-quality work they produce. A review of books showed that disadvantaged pupils are now making better progress. This progress accelerates further as they progress to key stage 3, where increasing proportions are working at greater depths of understanding. Although overall progress remains behind that of their peers in school, more focused teaching and support is leading to improving progress for disadvantaged pupils.
- Leaders are working to address the needs of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The deputy headteacher and special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) has a good awareness of pupils' needs. She has developed close links with parents and secures high parental involvement at review meetings to discuss the effect of support on children's progress. A small number of parents believe communication could be strengthened. Leaders have made recent appointments to add to the capacity of the team supporting pupils with SEND. Additional work is being carried out to assess pupils' needs, involving external specialists where necessary. Teachers are being asked to account for the progress of pupils with SEND more assiduously at their regular subject review meetings. Leaders have set up specific support groups to address the needs of pupils with SEND. A review of pupils' work showed that these processes are helping these pupils to make better progress, although on occasions progress remains weaker than that of their peers.
- Leaders have placed significant emphasis upon strengthening the curriculum. Over the past year, all subject leaders have worked with colleagues in local middle

schools and high schools to develop a rich and coherent curriculum. Teachers have explored their curriculum intentions and how they will sequence curriculum content over time. While these plans are being developed for September 2019, there are already signs they are having positive effect. In English, teachers are enabling pupils to engage with more-demanding texts and genres, while in history leaders are encouraging pupils to explore primary sources and differing interpretations of historical events. In mathematics, pupils are accessing more-complex problems on a regular basis while in science pupils are exploring conceptually challenging topics, such as the differences between weight and mass. Your teams have invested considerable time and resource into this curriculum development that is helping to raise expectations across departments.

- Your teachers are also working with first school colleagues to improve the transition from key stage 1 to key stage 2. Teachers from first and middle schools are working together to moderate standards of work and develop a stronger understanding of standards and curricular expectations. Teachers are paying closer attention to the knowledge and skills that pupils demonstrate on entry to middle school to build on their strengths and to address any gaps earlier.
- Leaders and teachers provide pupils with a wide variety of planned enrichment activities to build cultural capital and develop pupils' self-esteem. Teachers plan themed days to offer pupils immersive experiences of history or geography that stimulate the study of these subjects in class. Pupils attend a range of clubs, from gardening to sport and visit art galleries and places of historical interest. Leaders ensure that particular groups of pupils take part in additional activities, including disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND. Form tutors are now monitoring pupils' participation in activities to ensure that all pupils benefit from the experiences on offer. Heightened engagement with universities and employers is making pupils more aware of the connections between their learning and the wider world.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- any remaining inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and assessment are addressed so that higher expectations are embedded across all subjects and classes
- actions to address remaining differences in pupils' progress, including that of middle-ability pupils, disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND, are consistently and effectively implemented.

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

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Information about the inspection**

As part of the inspection, we explored how teachers were helping pupils to make good progress, particularly those pupils in the middle of the ability range. We also looked into the actions that leaders and teachers were taking to meet the needs of pupils with SEND and disadvantaged pupils. We also looked at the wider curriculum and how well leaders had dealt with areas for improvement from the previous inspection.

During the inspection, we met with you, your deputy headteachers, senior leaders and a wide range of middle leaders. I also spoke by telephone to the chair of trustees and the school improvement partner. We held a meeting with a group of pupils and talked to pupils at break and lunchtimes. We discussed pupils' learning with them in lessons. We looked at learning in lessons and were accompanied by leaders on some of these visits. We also looked at pupils' work in books. We examined school improvement priorities and discussed pupils' progress. We looked at documents, including the school's self-evaluation, behaviour and attendance records and the school development plan. We examined safeguarding documents, including the single central record. I considered 100 responses to Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire and 55 free-text responses from parents. I also took into account 66 responses to the pupil questionnaire and 25 responses to the staff questionnaire.