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Mrs Marian Haines  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Haines

### **Short inspection of Thomas Johnson Lower School**

Following my visit to the school on 23 February 2016, 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 2011.

#### **This school continues to be good.**

Since your appointment as headteacher in September 2014 you have made sure that pupils continue to receive a good-quality education at Thomas Johnson Lower School. Every parent who completed Ofsted's Parent View questionnaire and who shared their experience of the school in discussions, would recommend the school. Similarly, staff and governors are very positive about the clear direction you provide, which is reflected in, and underpinned by, values that are shared by the school community.

You are using your experience of working in and with outstanding schools to set high expectations. This is reflected in your accurate self-evaluation of the school. Although you rightly acknowledge the improvements already made, you know that pupils could achieve even more. However, you have established a really strong basis on which to build whereby staff, pupils, parents and carers are working very well together. For example, writing about the recent 'English shouldn't be scary' workshop staff provided for them, parents and carers have written very appreciative comments such as 'great now to be able to help and support more learning at home'. This reflects a significant improvement since the last inspection when the school was asked to strengthen links with parents and carers.

Your work to give children a strong start at school by bringing together the work of the Nursery and Reception has been successful. The proportion of pupils reaching a good level of development has risen sharply. Effective teamwork between staff, purposeful learning activities and a greatly enhanced environment inside and outside the school are contributory factors. You have used the support and fundraising of the parents association wisely to provide stimulating resources for pupils. Staff are

teaching pupils how to use equipment carefully and constructively. Good questions are helping to maximise pupils' learning. For example, when pupils were learning to measure and weigh different materials, staff used the opportunity to extend pupils' counting skills. Challenge is a clear focus in the early years, supported by a rewards system that introduces pupils well to the school's values. You have worked collaboratively with the local authority to draw judiciously on the good practice seen in other settings.

In Year 1, pupils' phonics knowledge (letters and the sounds that they make) improved significantly in 2015. This was due to your careful analysis of pupils' much lower attainment in the previous two years. In particular, your work to help boys catch up has made a big difference. Pupils are enthusiastic readers. They develop a good range of vocabulary quickly to reach above average standards in their reading and writing. Throughout the school, pupils' literacy is reinforced regularly. For example, in the Year 1 and 2 class the teacher had prepared an attractive 'word mat' for use in a science lesson about the life cycle of a frog. This enabled her to explain words that were new to pupils which she challenged them to use accurately when annotating their work.

In the mixed Year 3 and 4 classes, the impact of your work to improve pupils' handwriting is clear. In one class, a well-presented display shows how pupils' writing has improved as a result of teaching them how to check their work, think of better ways of expressing their ideas and by developing their control with a pen. This approach has developed pupils' pride in their work, evident in their detailed drawings of longboats related to the class topic about Anglo-Saxons. In this lesson, the school's focus on values such as reflection and perseverance were clearly applied. In both Year 3 and 4 classes pupils' positive attitudes to learning are also reflected in their extensive homework projects completed with the support of their families. For example, carefully crafted models of homesteads and helmets show great variety of ideas and skills. However, the purpose of homework is not always specific enough to help parents and carers know how to focus their support.

Pupils who require additional support in school are well supported. This includes the work of two learning mentors who make a strong contribution to pupils' readiness to learn. School is calm and pupils develop considerate attitudes to others as a result. This extends beyond lessons to their conduct around the school and at breaktimes. Although 'playground ambassadors' are quite a recent initiative, your work to ensure that pupils are active in making friends and enthusiastic about participating in organised activities is valued by them. The school council is confident that their peers feel safe and supported because good behaviour is the norm. Very positive relationships exist between pupils and adults. This includes visitors who help to improve specific skills such as music and sports. Although a small school, pupils benefit from the wider links that school leaders make. You have successfully addressed the issues raised at the last inspection to increase the quality and frequency of culturally diverse links made. Provision for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is now a strength.

Your own coordination of English shows that improvements in pupils' achievements are underpinned by passionate subject leadership, regular monitoring and staff training. Although middle leadership of subjects is not consistently strong, your school

self-evaluation, which includes analysis of all subjects, provides a sound basis for wider improvement. Pupils are developing an understanding of different subjects. However, they are not always clear about the key subject skills required to excel in each subject. Your new monitoring of pupils' progress in science is a useful start.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

The school's safeguarding policies and procedures meet all statutory requirements. You and your governors ensure that staff are well informed about new guidance designed to keep pupils safe in education. This includes training in the 'Prevent' duty. Your role as designated safeguarding lead is highly visible and vigilant. Your approach, and that of the learning mentors, ensures that vulnerable pupils are supported early and effectively. Pupils, parents and carers feel that safety is well managed and is supported by clear rules and responsibilities, good relationships and positive behaviour. However, despite your revision of the school's anti-bullying policy, a small number of parents and carers would benefit from more information about how the school knows that it deals effectively with bullying. Pupils' learning about safety is integrated well into lessons. This was evident in the early years when children built a bridge using rubber tyres, wooden boxes and planks in response to the story 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff'. The teacher used the opportunity to talk to the children about addressing risks by working safely and considerately. They safely crossed their bridge.

### **Inspection findings**

- Leaders and governors have addressed the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Very positive work with parents and carers is supporting the school's work to promote pupils' personal and academic development.
- You have established an effective leadership team who are strongly supportive of your vision for the school. You share high expectations of pupils and challenge them to do their best right from the time they join the school.
- The school's self-evaluation is accurate and astute. This enables you to respond swiftly and successfully to any indication of underachievement. For example, you have improved boys' phonics results following a decline in previous years.
- Your aim to promote strong values across the school is embedded in the culture of the school. Leaders, governors, teaching and support staff, pupils, parents and carers all value the same qualities.
- The wide range of evidence used to judge the quality of teaching makes training relevant to the needs of staff and pupils. The roles of governors, linked to particular classes, give them good insight into the school's effectiveness.
- Your coordination of English provides a good role model for other subject leaders. Staff are clear about the skills and knowledge they are required to teach and use every opportunity to help pupils apply their literacy skills.
- The improvements in early years provision at the school give pupils a supportive, well-structured start to school life. The significant increase in pupils reaching a good level of development is underpinned by better provision.

- The governing body provides a high level of support and challenge. Governors have used an external audit to make their work more efficient and effective. This reflects school leaders' success in drawing on external links.
- Additional funding is used very effectively to ensure that different groups of pupils develop positive attitudes and achieve equally well. This includes disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs or disability.
- Teachers and teaching assistants build good relationships with pupils. The school's values are embedded because staff use every opportunity to reinforce them. Pupils benefit from the school's coherent approach to improvement.
- Classrooms are attractive and well organised. Displays of top-quality work in a Year 3 and 4 class are promoting pupils' pride in their work. Pupils are able to move between different activities quickly because resources are prepared well.
- Teachers explain the overall purpose of learning clearly to pupils. However, different success criteria are not always sequenced well enough to make sure that pupils know for themselves how to reach the next stage in their learning.
- External specialists in subjects such as sports and music enrich pupils' learning. In subjects such as English, staff use their subject knowledge very well to challenge pupils. Staff training is used to good effect.
- Teachers are consistent in their use of praise when pupils do well. In a Year 3 and 4 class the teacher's regular challenges about how to do even better contributed to pupils' initiative in solving problems for themselves.
- Pupils develop very positive attitudes to learning. This includes vulnerable pupils, disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs. The intensive support provided by learning mentors is a contributory factor.
- The school's values are respected by pupils. For example, in assembly pupils reflected on 'responsibility'. The pupils who took responsibility for parts of the assembly showed their peers how they could apply their values.
- Pupils are attentive when listening to their teachers and thoughtful when answering questions. They collaborate well when working in pairs or groups. Pupils' good behaviour contributes to the positive climate for learning.
- The school council, representing classes from Year 1 to 4, felt that behaviour had improved since the school's values had become more prominent. They appreciated the school's work to promote friendships in the playground.
- The school's safeguarding procedures help pupils feel safe and supported. They know who to turn to should they have any concerns. This is reflected in strong parental confidence that their child feels safe at the school.
- The standards attained by pupils are rising. This includes the early years, where the proportion achieving a good level of development improved significantly in 2015. This is reflected in current work and records of children's achievements.
- Standards in phonics have improved to reach an above-average proportion achieving the expected standard in 2015. In particular, boys' knowledge of the sounds that letters make has improved markedly.
- Outcomes are above average in mathematics, reading and writing. However, the school does not routinely track pupils, following their transfer to middle school, to know how well they achieved by the end of Key Stage 2.

- Different groups of pupils make equally good progress. This includes pupils who have special educational needs or disability. Pupils who find learning difficult are well supported.
- Disadvantaged pupils achieve as well as their peers at the school and other pupils nationally. Although analysis of their test results is unreliable, due to small cohorts, school leaders analyse their work regularly and rigorously.

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

Leaders and governors should ensure that:

- subjects across the curriculum are coordinated equally well so that pupils are well prepared for specialist teaching in the next stage of their education
- the best practice in teaching is used in all classes, including the high levels of challenge that are leading to pupils' refining of skills and deepening of knowledge
- the purpose of lessons and homework is consistently clear so that pupils are able to focus on the things that will help them reach higher standards still.

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

Her Majesty's Inspector scrutinised the single central record and other documents relating to safeguarding and child protection. Meetings were held with school leaders, representatives of the governing body, the local authority, staff, parents and carers. The inspection involved meetings with groups of pupils formally and informally and scrutiny of their work. All classes were observed jointly with you, together with an assembly. Additional documentation was analysed, including reports to governors, the school's self-evaluation and improvement plan, and information about pupils' attendance, behaviour and welfare. The inspector discussed the school with parents in meetings and in the playground, analysed 20 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, 20 freetext messages and 6 responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.