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Mrs Elizabeth Killeen
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Killeen

Short inspection of Eskdale Academy

Following my visit to the school on 5 December 2018, 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 2015.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Based on the evidence gathered during this short inspection, I am of the opinion that the school has demonstrated strong practice and marked improvement in specific areas. This may indicate that the school has improved significantly overall. Therefore, I am recommending that the school's next inspection be a section 5 inspection.

The leadership of Eskdale Academy is strong. You work closely and effectively with the executive headteacher, who is also the chief executive officer of Stranton Academy Trust. Together, you are uncompromising in your ambition for continuous improvement for all pupils and staff. You demonstrate a joint vision for excellence, and, in your own words, a 'no excuses and no limits' culture. This has resulted in high expectations of all pupils, regardless of their previous starting points or individual circumstances. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils in your school is considerably higher than the national average. However, you refuse to accept that any barriers or challenges faced by pupils will affect their education or development. Consequently, all groups of pupils have confidence in themselves as learners and, ultimately, they achieve well from their individual starting points.

You have established a strong leadership team who share your vision and determination for high standards. Leaders access high-quality training, including courses where they can gain national qualifications in leadership. As a result, all decisions they make are based on educational research and evaluative practices. This has led to consistent approaches to teaching, learning and assessment across the school.

Staff morale is high because staff say that they feel supported, valued and are treated with respect. They recognise that leaders create a climate in which staff are trusted to take risks and innovate in ways which are right for pupils.

Pupils are immensely proud of their school. They demonstrate a love of learning and describe their favourite lessons and activities with enthusiasm. Year 6 pupils are ambitious in their future aspirations. Their career choices include working as a doctor, a vet, a footballer or a supermarket manager. Pupils talk confidently about the core values of the school, which include hard work, determination and ambition. They say that adults in school respect them and that helps them to respect people's differences. One pupil stated, 'It doesn't matter if we are all different: we are all people inside.'

Parents and carers are appreciative of the partnership they have with school staff. They used words to describe the school such as 'fantastic', 'supportive' and 'brilliant'. One parent praised the teachers for how much they care about pupils' well-being and another commented, 'My children both enjoy attending school and are making excellent progress.'

The local governing body is responsible for the strategic development of the school. Governors work closely with you and other leaders to evaluate how well the school is doing. Reports written by governors about their visits are detailed, relevant and focus on the school improvement priorities. Governors bring a wide variety of experience and expertise to their roles. This helps them to reflect on what they have observed and to ask pertinent questions. They have identified their own specific targets for governors within the school improvement plan in their focus on continuous development. Despite the positive achievements of pupils, governors are committed to improving outcomes further. In-depth training on understanding the standards reached at each key stage has enabled new and experienced governors to gain further knowledge and challenge leaders on the published outcomes data.

You have addressed the areas for improvement from the previous inspection successfully. Pupils now make strong progress across key stage 1. The proportion of pupils meeting the expected standard has been above the national average in reading, writing and mathematics for three years. In 2018, the proportion of pupils reaching the higher standards was broadly in line with the national average for reading and mathematics and above the national average for writing.

Since the last inspection, you and your mathematics leader have increased the opportunities for pupils to apply their mathematical skills and solve problems. This has resulted in pupils' rapid progress, particularly across key stage 2. In 2018, progress measures for all pupil groups were well above the national average.

Safeguarding is effective.

The leadership team has ensured that all safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Together, you have established a strong culture of vigilance because you

care about every individual in your school. Staff and governors receive regular training on safeguarding so that they know precisely what to do if they have any concerns about a pupil. The school business manager is meticulous in ensuring that the required checks are made on all staff, governors and volunteers who work in the school.

Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding are diligent and tenacious. They have a systematic approach to the recording of all incidents and concerns which is thorough and detailed. Any follow-up actions are swift, with leaders working closely with the relevant external agencies. The school has compelling evidence that the intensive support they have provided for vulnerable pupils and families has had a positive effect on pupils' welfare, attendance and achievement.

All parents who responded to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, think that their children are safe in school, because adults look after their children well. Pupils say they know how to keep themselves safe, including when they are online. They say that bullying is rare, but that if it did happen they know that teachers would resolve any issues immediately.

Inspection findings

- Leaders' detailed assessments indicate that a large proportion of children enter Nursery with skills and abilities below those that are typical for their age. The early years staff use this information to provide a calm and purposeful learning environment which meets the needs of all children. Staff carefully design activities, indoors and outdoors, to help children to develop independence from an early age. The learning environment for children who are two years old offers a calm, inviting and safe space which is appropriate for their age and stage of development. Assessment information indicates that children, including those who are disadvantaged, make good progress across the early years classes from their respective starting points. The proportion of children who reached a good level of development by the end of Reception was broadly in line with the national average in 2017 and 2018. The proportion of pupils exceeding the expected standard in the early learning goals is rising year on year at the end of Reception.
- In key stage 1, pupils make strong progress in phonics (letters and the sounds they represent). This is because the teaching, learning and assessment of phonics is effective. Children make a strong start in the early years where teaching focuses on pupils' learning behaviours and on developing their capacity to listen and concentrate. Phonics teaching in Years 1 and 2 builds upon this. Over the last three years, the proportion of pupils who reached the required standard in the phonics screening at the end of Year 1 and Year 2 was at least in line with the national averages. The pupils who do not meet the required standard can apply the phonic knowledge and skills that they learned so far when reading. However, these pupils are not always given the opportunity to read and reread books that match the sounds they know. Therefore, the rate at which they develop the fluency and expression they need to be successful readers is not rapid.

- The proportion of pupils who reach the expected standard in science by the end of key stages 1 and 2 is broadly in line with the national averages. Pupils' science workbooks and assessment information, however, indicate that pupils are currently making good progress in many aspects of the science curriculum. Pupils' books contain examples of pupils working scientifically and carrying out a range of interesting practical activities and investigations. They also show that pupils can describe their findings using scientific language accurately. However, there are fewer examples of where pupils justify or disprove their scientific ideas and where they use results to identify further observations. The leader of science is new to her role, but she has an accurate view of the strengths and further developments required in science across the school.
- The quality of teaching across the school is consistently strong. This is a result of the effective training and support that leaders have provided for teachers and teaching assistants. This helps them to routinely develop their skills. In the lessons that we visited, incisive questioning by the teachers helped pupils to deepen their understanding of the rules of English grammar. Consequently, pupils can form complex sentence structures appropriately. Pupils' writing books show that this is leading to rapid progress. When we visited the Year 6 class the pupils were analysing the lyrics of a popular song. Skilful teaching enabled pupils to consider how to express emotions and experiences. This resulted in pupils using sophisticated vocabulary to describe how people might feel in difficult circumstances.
- Teachers and teaching assistants provide effective support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). This is because staff benefit from the guidance of the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) and specialist staff who work in the additionally resourced language base for key stage 1 pupils. Pupils with SEND make strong progress in reading, writing and mathematics, particularly across key stage 2.
- Pupils' attendance has improved over the past three years from below the national average to be at least in line with the national average for all groups of pupils. This is due to the determination of school leaders to make sure that pupils attend school as regularly as possible. For example, leaders provide free places on the school minibus each day, they offer awards and recognition for good attendance and they follow up any absences daily. A small number of pupils are regularly absent from school, but this proportion is much lower than nationally. Leaders work closely with the local authority to provide support plans for these pupils and their families.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- teachers sharpen practice in science so that pupils have more opportunities to carry out detailed investigative work, to help them to develop a deeper understanding of the subject

- they further embed practice in phonics so that all pupils can use books that are closely matched to their current level of phonic knowledge.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Hartlepool Borough. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alison Aitchison
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection I met with you, the executive headteacher, your deputy headteacher, senior and middle leaders, governors and the school improvement partner. I also met with the human resources officer and the head of inclusion who both work across schools in the Stranton Academy Trust. I met, formally, with a group of pupils to discuss their attitudes to learning and their views of the school. I listened to a group of pupils from Years 2 and 3 read. Together with you or the executive headteacher, I made visits to classrooms to observe pupils learning around the school. I also visited your additionally resourced language base. I looked at pupils' workbooks across a range of ages and abilities, as well as discussing the information from the school's assessment system. I discussed the work of the school, including the procedures and processes in place for safeguarding. I also viewed documentation, including the checks that you have made on the quality of teaching, your school improvement plan and governor meeting minutes. I took account of nine responses to Parent View, including parents' free-text responses. I considered 20 views from the Ofsted staff survey and 26 responses to the Ofsted online pupil survey.