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9 January 2018

Mrs Deborah Ward  
Headteacher  
Croftway Primary Academy  
William Street  
Blyth  
Northumberland  
NE24 2HP

Dear Mrs Ward

### **Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Croftway Primary Academy**

Following my visit to your school on 19 December 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in April 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

### **Evidence**

During this inspection, I held meetings with you, your senior leaders, and middle leaders. I also held a meeting with a group of pupils in Years 5 and 6 and talked to pupils in lessons about their learning. I also met the vice-chair of the academy trust and the trust improvement partner, and I held a telephone conversation with a member of the local academy committee. I carried out a tour of the school with you and your early years leader. I held a meeting with subject leaders for English and mathematics and looked at work in pupils' books and folders. I looked at a range of documents from school leaders and external partners which covered many aspects of the school's performance, including a review of the use of pupil premium funding. I also considered attendance and safeguarding documents. The school's improvement plan and the trust's statement of action were also evaluated.

## **Context**

You and your deputy headteacher took up your posts in September 2017. Prior to formally taking up your post, you provided ten days of consultancy support in the summer term, enabling new systems and approaches to be developed in readiness for the start of the new academic year. Six teachers and two teaching assistants have left the school and five new teachers have been appointed. A number of leadership roles have been realigned, with leaders in areas such as the early years and special educational needs afforded more time for their leadership responsibilities.

## **The quality of leadership and management at the academy**

You have brought much needed clarity and purpose to the school improvement journey that are valued by pupils and staff. You inherited a legacy of sustained underachievement, compounded by the extremely weak pupils' outcomes in the summer of 2017 and structural flaws in many aspects of leadership. Undaunted by this, your work with middle leaders prior to appointment put systems and structures in place that built up considerable momentum ahead of the new academic year. The arrival of a new deputy headteacher has brought additional focus and energy, with regular reviews of pupils' progress used to inform planning and professional development. These thorough monitoring systems have contributed to a consistent focus upon the quality of teaching, learning and assessment that is leading to improvements in pupils' progress.

You have welcomed challenge and external scrutiny. The absence of these qualities had contributed to the school's previous decline. Reviews of important areas, such as the use of pupil premium funding, early years provision, special educational needs and mathematics, have identified areas for improvement. You have subsequently worked with the trust's school improvement lead to manage the introduction of improvement strategies in an effective manner, without overwhelming staff.

Leaders have introduced a new focus on assessment, encouraging teachers and teaching assistants to unpick curriculum demands and refocus their planning as a result. More regular and more rigorous moderation processes are enabling teachers to generate a more accurate view of standards. Staff show examples of their pupils' work when submitting performance information to demonstrate the evidence that lies behind their judgements. Leaders have ensured that teachers have a particular focus on the progress of the disadvantaged pupils in their classes. Teachers have to further account for the progress of these pupils in their performance management objectives.

You have realigned and apportioned leadership roles and responsibilities. This has enabled key staff to work as leaders rather than practitioners. Staff with responsibilities for areas such as mathematics, special educational needs and the

early years now have the time and capacity to review performance and provide ongoing support and professional development opportunities for their colleagues. Teaching staff appreciate the support that is available and do not feel apprehensive in seeking guidance. Despite the increased monitoring, staff do not feel overburdened as they believe that their actions are more purposeful and valued. They welcome the direction provided by new leaders that they previously lacked. Staff also appreciate small but symbolically important improvements, including changes to the building that have created a safer, better-lit and uncluttered working environment.

Middle leaders have both attended and provided training in order to spread good practice. You have shared subject leadership roles in order to provide the capacity needed to implement change at a rapid pace. Staff meetings now have a sustained focus on teaching and learning developments. Teaching assistants have benefited from a range of training, including speech and language and mathematics training. Teaching assistants take part in regular meetings with their teaching partners to plan support and check the effect of the interventions they have provided. They have clear performance management targets linked to the impact of the support they provide, with a particular emphasis on the progress of disadvantaged pupils.

Improvements are emerging in many aspects of teaching. Pupils commented on much higher standards of behaviour in lessons, and this was reflected in much of the learning observed, where pupils showed a consistently positive approach to learning. Pupils described teachers as showing a renewed passion for teaching. High expectations were evident in Year 6 English, where pupils explore challenging vocabulary and explored how Dickens captured Scrooge's emotions in 'A Christmas Carol'. Pupils' books showed a stronger focus on the quality of pupils' writing and their grammatical accuracy in their response to feedback in their 'purple polish' tasks. In mathematics, much consistency was evident in the use of new teaching methods as pupils developed their concrete understanding before considering more abstract ideas. Teachers provided pupils with regular access to problem-solving activities, although pupils' understanding remains more variable and much still needs to be done to overcome the legacy of underachievement.

Leaders have undertaken a number of actions to improve pupils' attendance. The family team has been restructured, creating more time and capacity to work with parents and families. Senior leaders are now much more visible on the playground, greeting and talking to parents and holding conversations to address attendance issues. Leaders have provided support for families but have also taken firmer action when needed. Their actions have already resulted in improvements in attendance this term for all pupils and for disadvantaged pupils.

Teachers are building up pupils' resilience through stronger routines and an enhanced use of resources. Pupils could all cite the importance of seeking 'three before me', to help pupils pursue independent means of solving problems before seeking their teacher's help. Parents are also receiving much more helpful

information to enable them to support learning at home, particularly through materials to encourage discussion around reading. Significantly enhanced provision in the early years is improving learning through an array of visual and verbal prompts and the creation of targeted learning zones that are enabling children to learn productively in their independent work and play. Pupils cited a tangible improvement in behaviour as a key indicator of change. They also felt that new rewards systems were encouraging all pupils to demonstrate more positive attitudes to learning in lessons.

You have brought with you a track record of securing significant improvements for schools in challenging circumstances. While you do not underestimate the scale of improvement required, there is evidence that clear leadership, stronger monitoring systems and ongoing support and professional development are creating a positive momentum for improvement.

### **External support**

An action group comprising trust members, officers and the headteacher was set up by the Blyth Quays Trust following the inspection. This group meets fortnightly to discuss headteacher reports and to directly review the pace and impact of improvement. The trust's school improvement officer has both monitored improvement and provided training and support, contributing to significant improvements in the early years provision. The local academy committee provides additional scrutiny, although in the short term has passed some of its monitoring responsibilities to the action group in order to secure rapidity of change.

The Blyth Quays Trust retains overall responsibility for school accountability. Of the seven members, only one is on the action group and this is helping to retain an objective layer of accountability. The trust has commissioned additional reviews of many aspects of school performance by external school improvement partners and a neighbouring local authority. This has brought additional objective scrutiny and school leaders and trust members have shown a responsiveness to suggestions for improvement.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

I am copying this letter to 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**