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Thursday 11 November 2010

Mrs K Clough and Mr N Flanagan
Syresham St James CofE Primary School
High Street
Syresham
Brackley
NN13 5HL

Dear Mrs Clough and Mr Flanagan

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Syresham St James CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on Tuesday 9 November 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in May 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection are set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

The school may not employ newly qualified teachers other than the one already appointed with the permission of Ofsted.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Northamptonshire and the Diocese.

Yours sincerely

Michael Sheridan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in May 2010

- Accelerate pupils' progress in writing and mathematics so that they can reach levels of attainment that are consistently well above average by:
 - ensuring that pupils have clear relevant targets and are kept well-informed about how they are doing and how they can improve
 - improving and extending systems to accurately assess and track pupils' progress
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to practise and extend their literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum.

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by:
 - using time more purposefully and productively in lessons
 - raising expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - making effective use of information about what pupils already know and are able to do to inform lesson planning
 - planning lessons that challenge pupils of all abilities to build on and extend their knowledge and skills
 - putting more emphasis on what the pupils will learn rather than do in lessons
 - deploying teaching assistants more effectively to support learning.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that all aspects of monitoring and evaluation are rigorous and sharply focused on outcomes for pupils
 - establishing high expectations and aspirations in all areas of school life, including behaviour
 - empowering subject leaders to drive improvements
 - providing the governing body with an accurate picture of the school's performance, so that it can hold the school to account and shape the school's future direction.

Special measures: monitoring of Syresham St James CofE Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on Tuesday 9 November 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the two headteachers, curriculum leaders, pupils, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. Inspectors also talked with several parents at the beginning of the school day.

Context

At the time of the last inspection, the substantive headteacher had returned to work part-time following maternity leave. Since then, her hours have been increased to three and a half days a week. The other headteacher, known in school as the senior teacher, now has a full time teaching commitment and is headteacher for one and a half days a week. Two part-time teachers are absent from school. Their class responsibilities are being covered by permanent members of staff who have extended their part-time hours. One teacher has left the school and one teacher has had a temporary contract made permanent. The school's governing body has a new Chairman. The school's role has reduced significantly from 92 at the last inspection to 65.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Achievement is improving. The most recent test results showed that last year's leavers, who were a particularly able cohort, reached above average attainment. The current Year 6 pupils have realistic targets that, if reached, will represent similar progress and broadly average standards of attainment. Pupils at Key stage 1 are reaching broadly average standards of attainment. However, too few are reaching the higher levels that are expected when taking into account their higher than expected starting points. There remains a legacy of underachievement within the school but clear signs are emerging that this is being reduced. Work in pupils' books and in lessons show that pupils are beginning to make better progress overall.

As teaching improves, pupils are enjoying their lessons more. Relationships are positive between pupils and staff. Pupils' work is becoming more suitable to their needs and interests, particularly in mathematics. However, progress in writing, while improving, is somewhat slower in some parts of the school because work and guidance is not sharply focused enough on the next steps needed to support pupils in making improvements.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- Accelerate pupils progress in writing and mathematics so that they can reach levels of attainment that are consistently well above average – satisfactory.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils' behaviour has improved. Pupils say that the strategies the school has developed have been effective in helping them know what behaviour is appropriate. They say that they enjoy the traffic light system and they talk proudly about the rarity of pupils in their class being 'put onto red.' In almost all classes and around school, pupils demonstrate behaviour that is polite and conducive to learning. Hardly any of the 'annoying behaviour' that was reported by pupils at the time of the last inspection was seen and pupils confirmed that this is now the norm. In a very small proportion of lessons, some pupils demonstrate inappropriate behaviour. This is because, in these lessons, the curriculum is not engaging enough and work is not set at the right level. As a result, pupils lost interest and drifted off task.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching is improving throughout the school. Much of the local authority's support had been focused on developing teachers' skills and expectations. Little time is now wasted with pupils being expected to get down to work straight away, engaging in meaningful tasks that get them thinking during transition periods. Teachers are beginning to plan more effectively for teaching assistants so they know what is expected of them and, consequently, their support is better placed. Teachers recognise that the school has coasted for too long and that pupils are capable of more than has been expected in the past. There is a real determination amongst staff to get things right and improve their practice. Inspectors observed inadequate, satisfactory and good lessons. The proportion of lessons that are securely satisfactory and better has increased considerably, with pupils in some parts of the school making consistently good progress. Assessment is being used to plan lessons more effectively in mathematics. Teachers conduct a useful initial assessment at the beginning of each theme so that they have a knowledge and understanding of pupils' individual starting points. In some lessons, this information is used to carefully tailor work for groups and individuals and, as a result, they make accelerated progress. Teachers are using learning objectives to let pupils know what they are doing and, in some lessons, these are becoming increasingly focused. Marking has improved in consistency but some still lacks impact, particularly for writing. This is because not all teachers have a sufficient understanding of the small steps needed to be taken to improve work.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning – good.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The school continues to be led by two headteachers. The headteacher returning part-time following a maternity leave has brought a fresh drive and determination to move the school forward. Her role is seen as that of the lead headteacher by the local authority, governing body and the other post holder because she carries the weight of responsibility for headship within the school. The senior teacher has returned to class to maintain continuity for pupils in Years 5 and 6. While progress has been satisfactory overall in the development of senior leadership capacity, there remains a clear inequality in the distribution of roles, responsibilities and impact between these two post holders.

Senior leaders regularly conduct evaluations of the quality of teaching and developing provision. While these give the school and the governing body a useful narrative on what has been done, insufficient focus is given to the difference the school's actions are making for pupils. Similarly, action plans too often start with a commitment to develop provision rather than from an identified need to improve measurable outcomes.

A new system is in place that collects pupil progress data. Teachers and leaders are beginning to use this information to identify underperformance for groups and individuals. Teachers and leaders meet termly to discuss patterns of progress and to plan support for pupils who are making slower progress. Two factors are limiting the impact of this development. First, the assessments made by teachers are not always accurate, particularly in writing, and there is no system to moderate these. Second, the plans drawn up by teachers to support pupils making slow progress do not always identify specific barriers to pupils making better progress. Consequently, some of the plans have little impact in altering teaching to help these pupils catch up.

Middle leadership is developing but this remains variable. Mathematics is moving forward in relation to ensuring that all staff are increasingly aware of the small steps pupils need to make to move forward in their learning. In mathematics, teachers are beginning to use precise 'can do' statements to assess where pupils are and what they need to develop next. In literacy, little has been done to develop similar systems to support teachers in planning precisely and assessing appropriately. Middle leaders have begun to consider the position of their subject in the wider curriculum. There is some work being done to develop links between different subjects but this is by individual teachers rather than through a whole-school cohesive plan. Consequently, the links that are made are opportunistic and do not make the best use of the wider curriculum to develop and practise pupils' literacy and numeracy skills.

The governing body is much more focused and well informed. Individual governors are in regular contact with senior leaders. A committee of governors meets once a month with senior leaders and their level of challenge and insight is impressive. Minutes show that the full governing body is becoming increasingly focused in their questioning and are constantly seeking to corroborate the views expressed by senior leaders with additional evidence.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- Improve leadership and management – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority submitted a suitable statement of action to Ofsted outlining how it will support and challenge the school in improving. The local authority support for developing the quality of teaching is effective and continues to develop the consistency and effectiveness of classroom practice across the school. Leaders state that the local authority has been supportive of them and their actions. However, inspectors found little evidence to show that the local authority has been sufficiently challenging of leaders to focus their action plans and evaluations on improving outcomes for pupils. Several staff expressed a desire to work alongside and share good practice with colleagues from successful schools. Inspectors agree that this would be a useful addition to the external support currently provided.

Priorities for further improvement

- Clarify the distribution of roles and responsibilities for the dual headteacher arrangement.
- Ensure that teachers have a clear understanding of the requirements for each level of attainment in writing and the small steps pupils need to take to make progress.
- Ensure that teachers' knowledge of levels of attainment and next steps is used to inform their assessments, planning, target setting, marking for improvements and plans for individuals who are in danger of falling behind.
- Ensure that action plans and evaluations are sharply focused on the desired impact on pupils.
- Through the local authority, develop links with successful schools in similar contexts so that teachers and leaders can learn from best practice, moderate work and share ideas about curriculum development.