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12 July 2012

Mrs M Partridge
Executive headteacher
St Andrew's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School
Church Road
Great Yeldham
Halstead
CO9 4PT

Dear Mrs Partridge

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Andrew's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School, Great Yeldham

Following my visit to your school on 10 and 11 July 2012, 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 8 March 2012. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is 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

Newly qualified teachers should not be appointed.

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 and the Executive Director for Schools, Children and Families Essex County Council and the Diocese of Chelmsford.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2012

- Raise attainment in English and mathematics so that pupils make consistently good progress throughout their time at school by:
 - making full use of assessment information to plan and deliver work that is appropriately matched to pupils' different capabilities and which challenges and extends them
 - ensuring that learning objectives set out what pupils are expected to learn and not just the activities to be carried out
 - maintaining a brisk pace in lessons
 - ensuring that pupils do not sit passively listening for lengthy periods by making sure they have more opportunities to get on with writing and practical activities
 - providing effective additional curriculum support for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, particularly in mathematics
 - giving all pupils clear guidance, through marking, in every subject that shows them what they need to do to improve their work.

- Develop more robust and effective management systems through:
 - ensuring that the school development plan incorporates measurable targets against which the governing body can gauge the school's progress
 - using the school development plan, as a management tool at each governing body meeting, to measure how much the school has improved, to question the school's leaders about the school's performance and to initiate changes where milestones are not being achieved
 - focusing lesson observations on pupils' learning and rates of progress
 - rigorously following up the points for development identified by school leaders from lesson observations, the scrutiny of assessment information, the analysis of pupils' work, and by keeping an appropriate written record so that improvement can be tracked
 - reviewing the organisation of phonics sessions for younger pupils so that learning is much more closely matched to pupils' prior attainment and that all staff are trained to model correctly the way that letters should be sounded out
 - working together within the school and with staff in neighbouring schools, to assure the accuracy of teachers' assessments, including those of children's skills and knowledge when they start in Reception.

Special measures: monitoring of St Andrew's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School, Great Yeldham

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 10 and 11 July 2012

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, nominated staff, a representative from the local authority and two representatives of the governing body, including the Chair of the Governing Body. Seven lesson observations were undertaken of five different teachers; most of which were observed jointly with senior leaders.

Context

Following the inspection in March the headteacher resigned her post. The school is led by the executive headteacher for three days a week, and by the acting headteacher for the other two days. A substantive headteacher has been appointed for September 2012.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The school's recent downward trend in attainment has been reversed this year. Pupils' results in end-of-Key Stage 2 assessments in 2012 meet the government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for attainment and progress, and are likely to exceed the national average, most markedly in reading and writing. Notwithstanding their relatively high starting points, the Year 6 pupils have made significant progress in Key Stage 2. The standard of their work in mathematics and English is impressive, with at least half of pupils achieving level 5 in reading and/or mathematics. Moreover, teaching prepares pupils well for their secondary education; they develop positive attitudes to learning and the essential confidence and resilience to work independently.

The school's systematic pupil-tracking information shows that progress is accelerating across all year groups and is more consistent. Inspection evidence supports the school's view that the quality of learning has strengthened, including for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, even in the short time since the inspection. However, there remains unevenness between classes. In the lessons observed during the monitoring visit, younger pupils made the most rapid gains. A sharply-focused and cleverly managed phonics session in Year 1 and 2, for example, quickly consolidated the pupils' understanding of letter sounds and challenged them to apply their learning to new and unfamiliar words.

The pace of learning was good in the majority of lessons observed, but is still too uneven, particularly when there is an imbalance of teacher-input and pupils' independent working. Lessons got off to a slow or unsteady start when teachers spent too long explaining, when exposition was unnecessarily complicated, and when pupils were expected to listen passively.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Raise attainment in English and mathematics so that pupils make consistently good progress throughout their time at school – satisfactory

The quality of teaching

The overall quality of teaching has improved, although some significant weaknesses remain. The majority of lessons observed during the monitoring visit were good. The more precise focus built into lesson planning has strengthened learning and sharpened the use of assessment. Short-term plans have clear learning objectives but also define specific outcomes that different pupils might achieve. Work is consequently now more challenging, and pupils' learning activities are more carefully designed to meet the particular needs of different groups. However, the impact of this improved planning varies, depending largely on the teacher's confidence in exposition and their skill in directing pupils' learning.

The best teaching is lively, imaginative and engaging. In the best lessons, pupils were actively involved from the outset, and were given responsibility to share ideas, work out answers for themselves and present their findings. Pupils in Year 1 and 2, for example, assessed their own performance in each of the pentathlon events used in the ancient Olympics, Year 3 and 4 pupils recreated the digestive system using plastic bags and assorted foods, and Reception children made and sampled Greek food using herbs and vegetables, some of which they had grown themselves. Pupils' enjoyment of learning is palpable in these lessons, and the pace of learning is rapid.

Teachers give pupils plenty of opportunity to work collaboratively and independently, but some shortcomings identified at the last inspection persist. The pace of some lessons in Key Stage 2 is rather slow, notably when the teacher's exposition is lengthy or over-complicated, and when questioning does not adequately engage the pupils. Although pupils sustained their concentration well, they made little progress when they were expected to listen to the teacher recapping or summarising for long periods of time.

Marking is completed conscientiously, and is often very detailed. The most effective formative assessments establish a dialogue with pupils, so that they know what they have done well and understand how they can improve, and sometimes encourage pupils to practise something that they have got wrong.

Some teachers have effective strategies for checking pupils' understanding in lessons and skilfully use their questioning to steer and extend learning. However, some lesson plenaries are ineffective because questioning does not assess what pupils already know or check pupils' understanding and misconceptions. The use of peer review and pupil self-assessment is generally underdeveloped.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils' very positive attitudes to learning are a strong feature of lessons. They settle quickly and sustain their concentration, even when expected to listen for extended periods of time. Pupils show consideration for others and develop good social skills. They work together well and willingly collaborate when discussing ideas in pairs and small groups. Their behaviour in the dining hall and in assembly is exemplary. The school's above-average attendance has been sustained this year.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The school has taken suitable steps to address each of the recommendations in the last inspection report. The executive headteacher has been decisive and effective in steering the school's recovery, and has skilfully prioritised improvements while also managing the day-to-day issues that arise. She has provided clear guidance for staff, for example in establishing 'non-negotiable' expectations for teaching and marking, and is rigorous in evaluating improvement. Importantly, scrutinies of work and lessons focus on priorities that are understood and agreed by all staff and are summarised clearly in written records. Recommendations arising from lesson observations are systematically followed up. Monitoring of provision and self evaluation are more systematic, thorough and robust. Consequently, improvement planning, including staff training and development, is securely founded on careful analysis of assessment data and regular evaluations of teaching.

The school has responded positively to the findings of the last inspection. Staff have worked hard to implement the detailed recommendations of the report and are reflective about aspects of their practice that need strengthening. However, the role, and consequently the impact, of the deputy headteacher and subject leaders is underdeveloped.

The governing body recognises that it had not effectively held the school to account and has responded positively to the guidance from the local authority. Governors are working hard to ensure that they are well-informed and are thus in a position to support and challenge the school, and strategically steer its further improvement.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Develop more robust and effective management systems – satisfactory

External support

The local authority's statement of action sets out a suitable programme to support the school's recovery. Immediate steps were taken to strengthen leadership so that time was not wasted and, since March, planned support for the school has been sharply focused and of high quality. The school has embraced the specialist guidance and timely support provided by local authority consultants, and has worked hard to implement the advice provided.

Only in exceptional circumstances, where they are crucial to the school's future success should priorities for further improvement be added

- Ensure that teaching in the two older-age classes maintains a brisk pace, by sharpening the focus of lesson introductions, the quality of teachers' questioning and engagement of pupils in plenary sessions.
- Promote leadership at all levels and develop the strategic role of senior leaders.