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Ms M Siequien
Interim headteacher
Downham Feoffees Primary School
Main Street
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Cambridgeshire
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Dear Ms Siequien

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Downham Feoffees Primary School

Thank you for the help which you, your staff and governors gave when I inspected your school on 20 September 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection.

There have been a number of staff changes since the last inspection. The interim headteacher has been in post since February and, following the substantive headteacher's resignation, plans are in place to make a permanent appointment. A new member of staff was recruited to the senior leadership team in September. In addition, there have been wholesale changes to the governing body: a new Chair and Vice Chair took up post immediately after the inspection and a significant number of new governors have been recruited. Two advisory governors, arranged through the local authority, have provided additional support and capacity for the governing body. One of the Year 5 class teachers has been on long-term absence since June.

As a result of the inspection on 12 January 2012, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making:

good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

The issue of declining standards at Key Stage 2 has been addressed, in the short term, by the consistently high-quality teaching in Year 6. Results in the most recent

national tests and assessments in 2012 reflect this improvement. Standards in English and in mathematics rose from significantly below average in 2011 to exceed the national figures in 2012, with a higher proportion of pupils making the expected rates of progress than pupils nationally. Lesson observations and analysis of assessment and tracking data support the school's view that progress is accelerating and achievement is improving, particularly in reading and writing. However, the school's forensic analysis of assessment data also indicates specific areas where progress can be accelerated, including at Key Stage 1 and in Reception.

The quality of teaching has strengthened. Opportunities for pupils to consolidate and develop their skills in English and mathematics are now systematically identified across the curriculum, and lessons are more challenging because teachers set ambitious learning outcomes and encourage pupils to work hard. However, the school's more rigorous approach to assessment and monitoring has brought to light disparities in the learning and progress of pupils in different classes, which reflect variability in the quality of teaching. The best teaching is outstanding, but some requires improvement because it is not consistently good and some is ineffective. In the best lessons, all pupils make rapid gains in their learning because work is carefully adapted for different groups, and activities are skilfully managed so that pupils participate actively from start to finish. The most effective teachers use a range of techniques to constantly assess the pupils' understanding so that their learning is consolidated and extended. The pupils enjoy lessons and behave well, but they make insufficient progress when work is pitched at an inappropriate level and is not well directed. These weaknesses in teaching reflect shortcomings in planning, assessment and management. In some lessons, the pupils have to sit and listen for too long without specific tasks to stimulate their thinking and engagement. The school recognises that some teaching is weak and that individual teachers need additional support.

There have been notable improvements in marking and the use of assessment, with some examples of excellent practice. Teachers give pupils detailed feedback and provide clear steps for improvement. Pupils are getting used to having to respond to this guidance; they enjoy setting their personal targets in mathematics and English, and having opportunities to review their own progress.

The school's leadership, including governance, has been transformed since the last inspection. The interim headteacher balances very well her day-to-day management duties with the need to drive rapid and sustainable improvement. Strategic development planning is sharply focused, and progress against quantitative success criteria is rigorously evaluated and monitored so that additional support can be carefully targeted and its impact maximised. The involvement of staff ensures that they share the same high aspirations and are beginning to understand their own responsibilities in driving improvement. The interim headteacher recognises that the development of subject leadership roles is a key priority, particularly in regard to using analysis of performance and evaluation of provision to steer further improvement.

The monitoring of teaching is systematic and rigorous, and provides constructive feedback to staff to improve performance. However, this more robust self-evaluation has highlighted shortcomings, particularly in teaching, that need to be strengthened. Observations undertaken jointly on the inspection confirm that much of the teaching is good or outstanding, but that there are weaknesses that need addressing.

Members of the governing body have worked hard to develop their roles, and have established clear systems, including separate committees, to ensure that their work load is shared more equitably. Importantly, governors now have a much better understanding of how to support the school and hold it to account, but the clarity and transparency of the information provided by the school makes it significantly easier for them to effectively fulfil their responsibilities.

The local authority statement of action is fit for purpose. It is well structured and soundly based on rigorous success criteria and key milestones for improvement. The plan sets out a sensible programme of support that has been well delivered and prudently adapted to meet the school's evolving needs. The school values this external support and guidance, including that provided by a local National Support school, and has used it well to develop sustainable leadership capacity, including governance.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Raise attainment and accelerate pupils' progress in English and mathematics by:
 - raising expectations of what pupils can achieve
 - making sure that teachers use assessment information effectively so work is consistently well matched to ability, especially for more-able pupils
 - extending opportunities for pupils to use their writing and mathematics skills in other subjects
 - improving teachers' marking so it clearly indicates how pupils can do better
 - involving pupils more fully in target setting so they know what they are working towards.

- Improve the rigour and purpose of the monitoring of the quality of teaching by:
 - linking lesson observations, carried out by all leaders and managers, to those areas requiring improvement which have been identified by the school
 - acting upon the findings to create well-structured areas for development so that all staff are clear about how to improve.

- Establish more rigorous and urgent strategies to reach ambitious targets by:
 - developing a well-focused improvement plan with clear objectives, demanding timescales and precise criteria against which success can be measured
 - ensuring that all staff understand the school's aims and work together towards common goals and raised aspirations
 - involving all staff in the effective analysis of data and improve their understanding of how this relates to work in the classroom and pupils' learning
 - increasing governors' knowledge and expertise in systematically holding senior leaders and staff to account for the school's performance.