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28 September 2012

Mrs M Kelly
Headteacher
St Nicholas CofE Primary School
Sarajac Avenue
East Challow
Wantage
OX12 9RY

Dear Mrs Kelly

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Nicholas CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 26–27 September 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in April 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed to any year group in the school.

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 Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire and Oxford Diocese.

Yours sincerely

Chris Nye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Strengthen leadership and management and build the school's capacity to improve as a matter of urgency by:
 - developing the skills of leaders at all levels to improve their role in monitoring the impact and effectiveness of the school's work, so there is a shared understanding of what needs improving and how this should be achieved
 - ensuring the monitoring of lessons focuses on how well pupils are learning
 - using the information gathered to identify and then follow up key development points for teachers to improve the quality of their teaching.
- By December 2012, improve the quality of teaching in Key Stages 1 and 2 so that it is consistently good or better in all lessons by:
 - ensuring teachers make effective use of assessment information to plan work that is pitched at the right level of challenge for all pupils
 - providing teachers with further training in how to teach phonics effectively and ensure phonics lessons in Key Stage 1 are organised so less-able pupils are supported to make better progress
 - ensuring pupils read more regularly to teachers.
- By July 2012, improve pupils' behaviour and the extent to which they feel safe by:
 - ensuring the school's anti-bullying policy is applied consistently and is fully understood by all staff
 - ensuring teachers have consistently high expectations of pupils' behaviour in lessons so learning is not disrupted.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 26–27 September 2012

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, including assessment information, strategic plans and evidence files, the outcomes of school surveys, visit notes from local authority officers, minutes of meetings of the governing body and interim executive board, and monitoring evidence. He met with the headteacher, parents and carers, pupils, staff, and a representative of the local authority, the headteacher of the partner secondary academy and a member of the interim executive board. Teaching was observed in every class during seven lesson observations. Pupils' work was scrutinised.

Context

The governing body has recently been replaced with an interim executive board. Two teachers who left the school at the end of last term have been replaced. Although no final decisions have been made, the interim executive board is currently exploring the possibility of the school becoming an academy.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Achievement remains variable throughout the school. Recently introduced strategies to tackle a long history of underachievement are not yet sufficiently well embedded to ensure a secure rise in pupils' attainment. In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children get off to a good start because the quality of teaching is good. As a result, at the end of July, the proportion of children who exceeded expected levels in all areas of learning was above the national average. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 has improved slightly in reading and mathematics, but remains too low in writing. Although the school's data suggest that progress has been swifter in Key Stage 1, not enough pupils are attaining the higher levels in reading, writing and mathematics. In Years 3 and 4, progress slows to below expected levels in reading, writing and mathematics. The most recent outcomes of national tests in Year 6 indicate that pupils attained well, with 100% achieving the expected level in both English and mathematics and around 50% achieving the higher level. However, inspection evidence shows that this was as a result of intensive external intervention and support by the local authority and partnership academy.

Standards in writing are not high enough and there has not been sufficient time for recently introduced strategies, such as a renewed focus on letters and the sounds that they make (phonics) and extended writing, to have a sufficiently secure impact on raising pupils' achievement in writing. As a result, standards of spelling, handwriting and presentation are not good enough. However, achievement in reading is showing some improvement and pupils' attitudes for learning are now more positive.

In mathematics, pupils' achievement is hampered by gaps in their calculation knowledge and skills. The school has recognised this issue and is developing a

common approach towards assessing and teaching skills in calculation progressively, to build upon prior knowledge and close gaps in pupils' learning. However, this is not yet sufficiently well embedded and it is too soon to judge the impact of this.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching across the school remains variable. The best teaching was observed in the Early Years Foundation Stage because there is a clear focus on matching the teaching to the individual needs of the children. Across the school, there are strengths in the relationships between adults and pupils and the positive way in which behaviour is managed. Teaching assistants make a positive contribution to supporting pupils, especially those who are disabled or who have special educational needs.

An encouraging start has been made to addressing the weaknesses in teaching identified in the last inspection and there is now a common understanding and agreement of what constitutes a good lesson. However, although an enthusiastic delivery is effectively motivating many pupils, in too many lessons the planned activities do not match the learning needs of the learners sufficiently well to ensure that they all make at least good progress. This is because teaching and resources do not always take sufficient account of the very wide range of pupils' abilities and needs in each class, particularly the more-able pupils; information on pupils' progress is not always detailed or accurate enough to ensure that activities are at the right level of challenge for all abilities.

All teaching and teaching support staff have been trained in phonics and are now in the process of embedding this into their practice. Daily phonics lessons have been established, but it is too soon to measure the impact of these on raising achievement in reading and writing. For example, the school recognises that further work is needed on how small group work is managed to ensure a swifter pace of learning for the less-able pupils and greater levels of challenge for the more-able pupils. A focus on guided reading and more rigorous systems of recording have ensured that pupils read more regularly to teachers and standards in reading are starting to improve accordingly.

Teachers' marking provides pupils with helpful guidance, but sometimes comments are written in a way that pupils find difficult to read and expectations, especially with regard to writing and presentation, are not high enough.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school has rightly focused on behaviour and the extent to which pupils feel safe, and has made reasonable progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the last inspection. During the inspection, behaviour in classes and during breaktimes was good. All statutory safeguarding requirements are in place and the school's behaviour and anti-bullying policies and recording systems are being consistently and rigorously applied. Parents and carers who spoke to the inspector commented

that they felt behaviour had improved considerably since the last inspection, and that their children now have a more positive attitude towards school. The outcome of the school's survey of parents' and carers' views, completed in July, shows a considerable improvement on the previous survey at the time of the inspection. For example, all parents and carers who responded to the survey said that their child felt safe and happy in school, and the very large majority said that behaviour was good. Pupils told the inspector that the school deals well with bullying and that the anti-bullying week held in the summer had been helpful. However, although the outcome of a pupils' survey carried out in July showed an improvement on a previous one, a significant minority of pupils still expressed concerns about how bullying was dealt with and who they could talk to. The school recognises that more needs to be done and has put in place activities such as class assemblies to further address this issue. Attendance has improved, but remains below the national average.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The pace of change and improvement is too slow. A key concern is the capacity of the school's leadership to respond with sufficient rigour and urgency to address long-standing issues of underachievement and to improve the quality of teaching. With the help of the local authority and partnership academy, strategic plans have been drawn up, but evidence that they are having a positive impact on improving the quality of teaching and securely raising pupils' achievement is limited.

Middle managers have a clear understanding of their roles, are developing leadership skills and know what needs to improve. However, curriculum action plans to address weaknesses, such as in writing and mathematical calculation, are at an early stage and monitoring systems have not had sufficient time to identify the impact of such plans on outcomes for pupils. External monitoring by the local authority is accurate and is starting to help improve the quality of teaching, but internal monitoring systems are not yet sufficiently well embedded to achieve similar outcomes.

A positive development has been the recent establishment of the interim executive board. Members bring a wide range of high level skills and experience and have rapidly got to know the school and what needs to be done to secure improvement.

External support

The local authority's Statement of Action is well designed to tackle the issues raised in the inspection report and a positive start has been made to helping the school address its significant weaknesses. Intensive and well-focused guidance and support has been provided by the local authority, the partnership academy and Oxford diocese, for example in mathematics and phonics. Clear notes of visit and a positive response from teachers suggest that this support is of good quality, but it is too soon to judge its impact. The local authority and partnership academy recognise the need for a more coordinated approach to detailed planning of future support so as to ensure that the best use is made of the available resources.