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11 October 2012

Mrs M Matthews  
Headteacher  
Holy Cross Catholic Primary School  
Charles Street  
St Helens  
Merseyside  
WA10 1LN

Dear Mrs Matthews

### **Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Holy Cross Catholic Primary School**

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 10 October 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please pass my thanks to the pupils, staff and to the representative from the local authority for spending time speaking with me.

Since the inspection, the deputy headteacher has given in his notice and will be leaving at the end of 2012. The leader of teaching and learning in English gave up her leadership responsibilities and the governing body appointed a new leader from within the school. A teacher was appointed from another school to join the senior leadership team as assistant headteacher. The governing body made an internal appointment to the senior leadership team of a teacher who has taken up responsibility for managing Key Stage 1 and the newly established system of teaching phonics (letters and the sounds they make). A newly qualified teacher was appointed to teach in the Nursery class at the beginning of September and is on a part-time contract. A teacher left in the summer term to take up a leadership post at another school. In addition to these staff changes there have also been changes within the governing body. The Chair of the Governing Body resigned and has been replaced by the vice-chair. Two new foundation governors have been appointed as well as a new governor representing the local authority and there is due to be a new parent governor starting in the next month.

As a result of the inspection on 26 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 outstanding progress in addressing the issue for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

Since the inspection, standards, particularly in English, have improved significantly. In Key Stage 1 by the end of Year 2, there was an increase of 15% in the proportion of pupils attaining the expected Level 2 in reading and writing and approximately 20% more pupils

January 2012



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

attained the higher Level 3 in both aspects of English. Standards in mathematics also increased. By the end of Year 6 the proportion of pupils attaining the expected Level 4 in reading rose by almost 20% and in writing by 27%. Similarly, the proportion of pupils attaining the higher Level 5 rose by 27% in reading and 25% in writing. This success in increasing pupils' attainment has been replicated in every year group.

After the inspection, the headteacher brought forward the planned system of teaching early reading and phonics from September 2012 to January 2012. Pupils, particularly in Key Stage 1, are now taught in groups containing pupils from different year groups who are at the same stage in their knowledge of phonics. They learn to read and write sounds in a clear structured progressive way and learn to blend sounds together to help them read. Older pupils successfully and confidently use phonics to help them read and to spell words they do not recognise by sight. These improvements have helped to raise pupils' reading skills and have made the teaching of phonics more consistent.

The staff have successfully introduced other systems to improve the teaching of reading. Teachers identify key questions to ask small groups of pupils across a range of different types of books that will help pupils move up to the next level of reading comprehension. These open-ended questions encourage pupils to think about authors, the use of words, characters and settings and they deduce information from the books they read. Teachers use a range of books and newly bought resources to stimulate pupils' interest and enthusiasm for reading.

Initiatives, such as word of the week, have started to extend pupils' spoken vocabulary. In Year 2, for example, a pupil successfully spelled 'appreciate' and explained to the headteacher what it meant and how to use it correctly in a sentence. In the Early Years Foundation Stage children knew what 'overjoyed' meant and how to use it in a sentence. Teachers have introduced 'talking partners' to encourage pupils to explain their thinking and their answers more often in lessons. During lessons, pupils cooperate with each other regardless of background or gender, they work well in pairs and in groups and are keen to learn. Pupils' behaviour in lessons and around the school is similar to that found at the inspection in January.

There have also been improvements to teachers' planning in order to improve pupils' speaking and listening and their writing skills across different subjects of the curriculum. There are strong links, for example, with history. Pupils were proud to show their work about air raid shelters linked with their study of the Second World War. There is an increased focus on writing for real purposes which has contributed to a significant improvement in the quality of pupils' writing. They use a variety of sentence openers, connectives and different styles in their work which is presented impeccably. The new focus in English lessons on learning grammar is paying off in pupils' improved sentence structure and knowledge of the workings of the English language. Pupils' spelling is also improving well as a result of a better focus on understanding phonics.

Underpinning the improvements the school has made is the frequent and well-organised professional development for all staff. They have been trained in, among other things, how to teach phonics systematically; how to alter English lessons to achieve a greater focus on learning English grammar; how to stimulate and inspire pupils to learn and they have worked alongside high quality teachers of English. There is a newly agreed marking policy which is having a positive impact on pupils' progress because pupils are shown clearly what they need to do next to improve their work.

Since the inspection there has been a new leader for English and a new manager for the teaching of phonics. The quality of monitoring has improved so that leaders have a better understanding of the attainment and progress of individual pupils and year groups in reading and writing. The next stage is to extend this knowledge to speaking and listening. The leaders and managers of English are more involved at an informal and formal level with the day-to-day monitoring and improvement in the quality of teaching.

Another key element of the school's progress is the good support it has received from the local authority. The statement of action which provides clear guidelines and actions for how the school should improve was identified as fit for purpose by Ofsted. The local authority has provided support through its advisors and consultants which has been targeted at the school's main weaknesses. It has brokered support from a local primary school judged by Ofsted to be outstanding and this support has helped the school to make progress in the quality of English teaching.

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

Yours sincerely

Mr Allan Torr  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Annex**

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

- Raise attainment and accelerate pupils' learning and progress so that it is consistently good or better in reading, writing and communication by:
  - improving the quality of teaching of reading, writing and communication so that it is consistently good or better throughout the school
  - ensuring a consistent, effective approach to the teaching of phonics, particularly through the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, including from support staff who lead intervention groups or listen to pupils read
  - ensuring that the development of pupils' speaking and listening skills is promoted across the curriculum by all staff
  - ensuring that literacy lessons and resources stimulate pupils' interest, enthusiasm and enjoyment of reading and writing
  - ensuring that there are sufficient professional development opportunities to enable all teaching and support staff, to teach reading, including systematic phonics, writing, speaking and listening accurately and well
  - ensuring that the literacy subject leader plays a more significant role in improving the school's provision and pupils' achievement.