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25 January 2013

Mr A Browne
The Interim Headteacher
St Nicholas CofE Primary School
Sarajac Avenue
Wantage
OX12 9RY

Dear Mr Browne

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Nicholas CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 23 January and 24 January 2013, 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 previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second 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 making reasonable 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 published 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, the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire and the Diocese of Oxford.

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 second monitoring inspection on 23 and 24 January 2013

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, including assessment information, strategic plans and evidence files, the outcomes of parent, staff and pupil surveys, visit notes from local authority officers, minutes of the interim executive board and monitoring evidence. He met with the interim headteacher, the parent champion, pupils, staff, a representative of the local authority and the Chair of the Interim Executive Board. The inspector also held telephone discussions with a member of the interim executive board and the headteacher of the secondary academy with which the school is working in partnership. Teaching was observed in every class during six lesson observations. Pupils' work was scrutinised.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection there has been a number of significant changes. The previous headteacher has been replaced by an interim headteacher, who will lead the school until permanent leadership arrangements have been finalised. One class teacher has been replaced by a teacher who has also taken on the role of mathematics subject leader. A new part-time teaching assistant has been appointed to the Year 3/4 class. As an interim measure, the role of special educational needs coordinator is being carried out on a part-time basis by the special educational needs coordinator of the partner secondary academy. The interim executive board is continuing to explore the possibility of the school becoming an academy, although no decisions have been made.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Since the previous monitoring inspection reasonable progress has been made in raising pupils' achievement, although the pace of progress and standard of attainment vary across year groups and in different subjects. In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children in the current group started school with skills below those expected for their age. However, although standards are still low, they are improving and children are making good progress, especially in communication and language and their personal, social and emotional development. This is because the quality of teaching and support is good.

In Key Stage 1, pupils' progress in reading and mathematics is accelerating, but progress is slower in writing because a high percentage of pupils have special educational needs in Year 2. Reading is rapidly improving because effective staff training in phonics (linking letters with the sounds that they make) has resulted in a

considerable improvement in teachers' and teaching assistants' skills and confidence in this area.

In Key Stage 2, reading has improved in each year group, except Year 5 where progress is too slow. Pupils demonstrate an enthusiasm for reading and most read regularly to an adult in school. Phonics training for staff and the development of such strategies as guided reading in each class are ensuring that reading skills are being taught effectively.

Although a whole-school calculation policy has only recently been introduced, pupils' achievement in mathematics is showing a steady improvement and, in each year group, most are on track to make the expected progress by the end of the year. However, although achievement in writing has improved since the last monitoring inspection, this has been slower than in mathematics, and standards are not yet high enough. A recent focus on presentation, spelling, handwriting and writing longer pieces of work for different purposes is not yet having a significant enough impact on the quality and quantity of pupils' written work.

The quality of teaching

The school has made reasonable progress in improving the quality of teaching, although some inconsistencies remain. No inadequate teaching was observed during the inspection, but not enough was good or better.

In the best lessons, good use is made of assessment information and teachers' knowledge of pupils' previous learning to plan activities which are well matched to their individual needs. For example, in a lesson on subtraction, scrutiny of previously undertaken assessments enabled the teacher to plan which methods of subtraction to teach so that pupils' understanding built upon what the pupils already knew. Learning objectives are made clear to pupils and teachers use challenging questioning to assess and extend the depth of their understanding.

In a minority of lessons where teaching requires improvement, this is because assessment information is not yet used effectively enough to plan challenging work. On occasions, teachers' expectations are too low, especially regarding the quality of pupils' writing, and opportunities are missed to extend their learning because superficial questioning does not challenge pupils sufficiently.

Consistent strengths in teaching across the school are the positive and effective way in which pupils' behaviour is managed and the impact of recently introduced individual target sheets for mathematics and writing. These provide clear indications of what pupils need to do to achieve the levels that they are working towards.

The marking of pupils' work provides clear indications of strengths and what pupils need to do to improve, but these are not always reviewed in subsequent marking.

In their written feedback to pupils, not all teachers model high enough standards of clear, cursive handwriting and presentation.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The school has continued to focus successfully on improving behaviour and the extent to which pupils feel safe. As a result, all the weaknesses identified in the last inspection report have been resolved and the behaviour and safety of pupils are now good. A newly updated behaviour policy is being consistently applied and during the inspection behaviour in lessons was exemplary because pupils were enjoying their learning. Throughout a 'wet playtime' this good behaviour continued because pupils were busily occupied with a range of games and activities, and because relationships between pupils are good. They say that they feel safe and happy in school and the most recent pupil and parent surveys show a significant improvement in their views about behaviour, compared with the previous surveys. For example, almost all pupils said that they feel behaviour is good and 100% of parents who responded to the recent survey agreed that the school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour. A very successful anti-bullying week has meant that pupils have a good awareness of the different types of bullying and what to do if they encounter them. Because pupils say that they enjoy coming to school, attendance has continued to improve and is now in line with the national average.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Since his comparatively recent appointment, the interim headteacher has had a significant impact on the speed and rigour with which the school has started to address long-standing weaknesses. He has suitably revised improvement plans and successfully motivated staff to work as a team so that the quality of teaching starts to improve and standards rise. As a result, the school now has a considerably better capacity to improve and this is the main reason why reasonable progress is being made towards the removal of special measures.

A significant improvement since the last monitoring inspection is the way in which middle leaders' skills have been developed, their roles further clarified and the resources allocated to enable them to monitor effectively the impact of their action plans on teaching and improved outcomes for pupils. The appointment of an interim special educational needs coordinator has meant that the progress of pupils with special educational needs is accelerating, and the subject leaders have a very clear understanding of what needs to improve in their subjects and how they are going to achieve this improvement. A good start has been made in addressing weaknesses, but leaders at all levels recognise that more needs to be done in order to achieve an acceptable quality of provision.

The exceptionally well-led interim executive board has been rigorous in holding the school's leadership to account. It has not hesitated in taking urgent, appropriate and decisive action to drive improvement. All staff, including the interim headteacher, have challenging performance targets which link directly to raising standards of pupils' achievement. The interim executive board recognises the need to find permanent solutions to leadership and management issues. It is working within an appropriate timeframe to ensure that the recent and rapid improvements that the school has made are embedded and maintained in the future.

External support

The local authority and partner secondary academy have provided extensive and well-planned support, especially for senior and middle leaders. A particular strength has been the practical guidance given to the interim headteacher and subject leaders in addressing specific weaknesses, such as in phonics and the development of a whole-school calculation policy. Since the previous monitoring inspection there has been a significant improvement in the management and coordination of this support so that more efficient use is now being made of the available resources.