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Miss Fiona Crellin
Headteacher
Askam Village School
Lots Road
Askam-in-Furness
Cumbria
LA16 7DA

Dear Miss Crellin

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit, under section 8 of the Education Act 2005, to Askam Village School, Cumbria

Following my visit to your school on 23 April 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in February 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, two class teachers who are members of the senior leadership team, two governors including the chair of the governing body and a general advisor from the local authority. The school improvement plan was evaluated.

Context

Since the inspection in February, a class teacher, who had resigned before the inspection, has left the school. A teacher who recently completed her initial year in teaching is now working full-time with a class of Year 3 pupils. One parent governor and a community governor have been appointed.

Main findings

You and the two senior teachers are working together to continue the action started before the inspection in February to drive improvement and raise pupils' progress and attainment. All staff have been involved in compiling the improvement plan which covers every aspect of the four issues identified in the inspection. Discussions and monitoring activities have given staff and governors a shared understanding of the factors underlying the issues,

such as the weakness in pupils' ready facility with number and in their ability to work independently. These factors are reflected in development priorities. Although the improvement plan identifies action to be taken, it has insufficient milestones and success criteria to indicate the expected impact on teaching and pupils' learning. Existing data in relation to the quality of teaching makes it possible to identify challenging targets and to differentiate targets for the three key stages and in different subjects.

Staff are taking a positive stance. Headway has been made in implementing the improvement plan and in working with a local school to develop provision in mathematics. Several teachers are trying out ideas seen on visits, such as setting up classroom bays for mathematical activities. Anecdotal evidence from staff and parents points to the success of a recent trial in the use of a computer program to improve pupils' skills in number. Packs of materials and guidance have also been prepared for parents to use with their children at home. The two leaders for mathematics, who are relatively new to the position, have attended subject-focussed meetings led by the local authority's general advisor and are more aware of the expectations of their role. Staff are also working to raise the profile of reading and to give more time to one-to-one reading as well as guided reading sessions. Pupils' and parents' views have been sought and the school is looking at how best to respond to the suggestions given. Alongside this, is a stronger emphasis on the basic skills in writing, with homework in spelling and opportunities for pupils to write at length.

The findings from the February inspection regarding teaching led to some debate but staff appreciate the need to accept different ways of working, particularly in developing pupils' skills as independent learners. You and your senior teachers have refined the system to track pupils' progress; ready access to data about the performance of different groups has highlighted the gaps between boys and girls. Such data now means that governors and you can regularly monitor whether gaps are narrowing or widening and hold teachers even more closely to account. Staff accept that there are nationally expected rates of pupils' progress. However, there is some way to go for all to appreciate the rising expectations that come with stronger teaching in accelerating pupils' progress and in tailoring provision to individual learning needs, especially when class sizes are lower than average.

The governing body is working with the school to bring about improvement. The impending training session for all governors and staff provides a good opportunity to identify how governors can play a more visible and effective part in school life. Given the appointment of two new governors, this is an ideal time to refresh governors' awareness of their roles and responsibilities, and to audit governors' knowledge, skills and expertise to pinpoint where training and support is needed. There is also scope to tighten the role of 'critical friend' in seeing how well the improvement plan is followed and in evaluating its impact.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Following the visit to the school, HMI recommends that further action is taken to:

- sharpen the improvement plan to give a) clear success criteria related to the expected impact of planned action, and b) clear milestones with qualitative targets, especially in relation to the quality of teaching, to enable critical evaluation of the effectiveness of action taken

- ensure that all teachers are fully aware of rising expectations of pupils' progress given the improving profile of teaching and relatively low class sizes
- refresh governors' awareness of their role and responsibilities and, via an audit of governors' knowledge, skills and expertise identify where additional training and support can enhance the effectiveness of governance of the school
- consider how best governors can act as 'critical friend', such as in a core group of governors taking prime responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the improvement plan.

Ofsted will continue to monitor the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority is providing support in developing the quality of provision and of governance; a member of the governor support team is leading the training session next week with governors and staff. The general advisor knows the school well and has recently observed teaching and learning. The headteacher has acted on her suggestion to colour-code the improvement plan which has given staff and governors a clear overview of progress in actions taken. In leading regular meetings for subject leaders in mathematics, the general advisor is guiding the development of the management skills of the school's two subject leaders. Partnership working in mathematics is ongoing with a local school; its headteacher is a Local Leader of Education. To date, Askam staff have benefited from seeing and discussing effective practice, some of which they are currently trialling in their own classrooms. An intervention officer from the local authority is also working with the school to develop provision in mathematics.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Cumbria.

Yours sincerely

Sonja Øyen
Her Majesty's Inspector