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16 May 2013

Miss Katherine Douglas
Headteacher
Brookmead School
High Street
Leighton Buzzard
LU7 9EX

Dear Miss Douglas

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit to Brookmead School, Buckinghamshire under section 8 of the Education Act 2005

Following my visit to your school on 16 May 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 in February 2013.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, each of your three assistant headteachers, the teacher responsible for leading phonics, two representatives from the local authority and seven governors. I evaluated your school improvement plan and we discussed your plans for developing this into a longer term plan from September. We walked around all the classrooms and observed pupils working in the 'forest' area. During these observations, I looked at pupils' work and talked to pupils about their learning.

Context

One teacher is currently absent from the school.

Main findings

Your plan is unambiguous in pointing out why the school is not yet good. You have clearly set out how you intend to deal with these issues. You have set about providing clear guidance to teachers about your expectations in respect of teaching and you have ensured that your monitoring is focused on these features. Teachers

say that they appreciate this clarity and the opportunities they have had in staff meetings to explore and reflect on what makes good teaching.

You have introduced a new scheme for teaching children the sounds that letters make (phonics). This scheme appears to be providing much needed structure to the way you teach children to read and spell. You have released a teacher to become expert in phonics and this seems sensible. She monitors the quality and impact of this teaching and provides support to teachers and teaching assistants in developing their skills in this new area. I like the fact that teachers and teaching assistants meet each week to discuss pupils' progress in phonics because it provides a useful opportunity for adults to support each other to develop their skills. I look forward to seeing how this scheme improves the early reading and spelling skills in your school over the next year.

You have given much thought to the ways that you can improve the quality of teaching. It is good to know that the inspection report helped to reinforce some of the difficult messages you had been delivering over time and I am pleased to hear that it has acted as a further catalyst for change and improvement. There is little doubt that your school is undergoing a positive change in culture. During our learning walk, your judgements were accurate and you were able to articulate clearly the reasons why some lessons were more successful than others. It was notable that some lessons had very similar plans but the method of teaching led to very different outcomes. In the most successful lessons, teachers provided lots of opportunities for pupils to work for sustained periods on challenging tasks. Adults helped keep pupils on track and challenged their thinking, but it was pupils who did most of work and they had to think hard to do this. In other similar lessons, teachers had done much of the thinking for children, either by providing prepared sheets that gave pupils too much information or through unnecessary interruptions to learning to make points that added little to the progress pupils made. It will be important moving forward that all teachers think about how to enable all pupils to think hard to complete their work. On occasion, the focus is on keeping pupils busy. I understand that you are encouraging teachers to observe each other more frequently. This is a good idea as long as you make sure that they have a sharp focus on what they are looking for to improve their own practice.

You are conducting regular meetings with teachers. In these meetings you consider the accuracy of teacher's assessments, look at the progress that pupils have made and consider any additional support that individual pupils might need. Some staff are unsure about the purpose of these meetings and some staff do not attend such meetings for both English and mathematics. It makes sense for all teachers to meet with senior leaders to discuss the progress that pupils make and the reasons why some pupils make less than expected progress. I recommend that you consider conducting moderation separately to this process so the two agendas do not get confused.

It was interesting talking to your three assistant headteachers. They are all very clear that they have been better able to step up and take responsibility for their areas of responsibility. They were all confident and eager to make a difference. The leadership of English is better developed than that of mathematics. We discussed the potential for additional training in the leadership of mathematics. There are national courses available to mathematics leaders in primary schools and I would encourage you to consider such training as a way to develop a real expertise in how pupils learn mathematics over time.

Your Early Years Foundation Stage Leader talked about how there is more structure in the day now for teaching children the important skills they will need to be ready for the challenges in Year 1. We walked around the reception classes during a less structured time of the day and I was impressed with the levels of children's curiosity and their language skills. The adults worked well with groups to help keep focus and encourage purposeful play. This is more positive than what was found at the last inspection.

Your governors bring a range of professional skills and I know that the Chair of the Governing Body has been proactive in ensuring new governors add to the skills that already exist. New governors talk about the fact that, when they joined, they were left in no doubt about the expectations on them to make a difference. Governors are determined to add to the capacity of the school and this is to be commended. I am impressed with the work that one governor has done in coaching leaders. The observations made by leaders indicate that it is making them think about what it means to be a leader. Governors are up for the challenge. They have started to monitor the work of the school. The model that they have developed to do this is appropriate and their observations they have made are pertinent. Governors are keen to know what they can expect and over what timescale. To help governors answer this, it will be important to include in your longer term plan an indication of key milestones so that governors can measure the impact of school improvement on the road to being good.

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, I recommend that further action is taken to:

- separate pupil progress meetings from moderation meetings so the purpose behind these does not get lost
- ensure the long term plan includes milestones that governors can use to monitor the effectiveness of school improvement
- develop the expertise of mathematics leadership so the school has a point of contact to rely on for the systematic teaching of mathematical concepts.

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

External support

You are supported by two local authority advisors who provide a range of guidance for leaders and teachers. They work well with you and you expressed a respect for their input. In turn they expressed confidence in your leadership. They have worked alongside you and your assistant headteachers in developing observation skills. They have supported the governing body in understanding the ramifications of the Ofsted judgement and in planning next steps. The local authority conducts regular reviews of teaching and leadership when schools require improvement. I would be grateful for a copy of their next monitoring report following their next review.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Michael Sheridan
Her Majesty's Inspector