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16 May 2013

Mrs Janet Conley
Headteacher
St Finbar's Catholic Primary School
South Hill Road
Liverpool
Merseyside
L8 9RY

Dear Mrs Conley

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Finbar's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit, accompanied by Angela Westington, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 15 May 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 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 February 2013.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, senior leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and four further governors, a representative of the local authority together with the Archdiocesan officer and the headteacher mentor. The local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement plans were evaluated. In addition a selection of pupils' reading books and records was scrutinised.

Context

There continue to be significant staffing issues at the school. Since the inspection, one teacher has resigned and another has left the school to teach elsewhere. Two teachers are on long-term absence due to illness. Two replacement classroom practitioners have been seconded from good or outstanding schools. Two other teachers, one on a fixed-term contract and the other on long-term supply, are providing cover until the end of the summer term. A non-teaching deputy headteacher has also been seconded from a good local school to support the headteacher until the end of this academic year. The school is working towards stabilising staffing for the start of the autumn term.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leaders, managers and governors of the school recognise why the school was judged to need special measures. There is a clear determination to remedy previous failings, but with significant staff turbulence the capacity to achieve this remains fragile. This has been recognised in both the school's action plan and local authority's statement of action. In the short term, good support is being provided to limit the problems caused by staff leaving and staff absence. Experienced teachers and a temporary experienced deputy headteacher have been drafted in to support the school and stabilise the situation. Termly local authority reviews are planned to monitor progress and enable additional intervention support, should this be required. Appointing good quality staff for the new academic year is a priority.

The school has also developed links with external partners within the local collaborative schools' network to aid school improvement. An external headteacher from a good local school has been appointed to mentor and advise the headteacher. This has proved particularly valuable in dealing with staffing and management issues but has had less impact on improving provision in teaching. Governors are committed to the school and governance has been strengthened by the co-option of four additional governors, all of whom have educational expertise. This has broadened and improved the knowledge base of the governing body but further training is still needed to develop the skills and knowledge of other governors to enable them to fulfil their roles appropriately. Governors are aware of their statutory duties and they are prepared to support the headteacher in the management of staff performance and monitor improvements closely.

Both the school's action plan and the local authority's statement of action provide a framework for improvement. The plans identify priorities, actions and success criteria and are a useful vehicle to support the school. However, they need to be adjusted to avoid duplication and overload, particularly at the start of the implementation period. They are strong on providing short-term measures to solve staffing issues, to develop teachers' expertise in assessing pupil progress and setting up more effective monitoring structures. However, they lack more specific longer-term strategies to develop teacher subject knowledge and skills. It is no good having an understanding of the principles of assessment if the teacher doesn't have the knowledge to teach subjects such as mathematics, science or history effectively in the first place. The school's action plan needs to define clearly how some of the basics are taught so that pupils get a consistent quality experience across the school. Initially, tackling certain key issues such as the reading deficit should be the most urgent priority for the school. Teachers need to be clear how subjects should be taught; for example, they should be clear that this is how we teach reading across the school; this is how we teach calculation, etc. In the longer term, subject leaders, not just those responsible for literacy and numeracy, need to take greater responsibility to ensure that teachers plan and are confident in delivering quality lessons in the full range of subjects.

The local authority and senior leaders have begun to evaluate the actions taken so far. Clear progress is being made to improve attendance and some of the strategies to raise the profile among pupils and parents are beginning to have an impact. The school still needs to explore other practical approaches to change attitudes, particularly of hard-to-engage parents, and ensure that their children attend school regularly.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose, but needs to be clearer as to how it will ensure that the school moves to a judgement of 'good' as quickly as possible. Currently, there is a focus on ensuring short-term stability.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose and provides a clear working structure for improvement. However, there is a need to rationalise some of the initiatives to prevent overload and to ensure that, as a matter of urgency, the basics, such as reading and writing are taught effectively across the school. This should provide the basis for improvement in other areas.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection. Governors should seek to maintain stability in staffing for the foreseeable future.

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

Yours sincerely,

Leszek Iwaskow

Her Majesty's Inspector