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10 June 2013

Mrs Rachael Fowlds
Headteacher
Unstone Junior School
Main Street
Unstone
Dronfield
S18 4AB

Dear Mrs Fowlds

Requires improvement monitoring inspection visit under section 8 of the Education act 2005 to Unstone Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 10 June 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 March 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with the headteacher and another senior leader, two representatives of the governing body, and a representative from the local authority. The school improvement plan and minutes of governing body meetings were checked. I also made short visits, with the headteacher, to all three classes to observe teaching and learning.

Context

There have been no changes to staffing or to the school's status since the last inspection.

Main findings

The headteacher, staff and the governing body have been successful in taking immediate action to begin to improve the school. The headteacher, with support

from the local authority, has revised the school's improvement plan. The plan addresses all of the issues raised at the time of the last inspection and includes appropriate arrangements for leaders and governors to check the school's work.

There are early signs in pupils' books that the quality of their writing is beginning to improve. This is because there are more frequent opportunities for pupils to write at length to practise their writing skills, particularly in history based topic work and in science. There are also more opportunities for pupils to write about real-life events. Discussions with pupils, including boys, indicate that they are becoming increasingly enthusiastic about writing and this is also supporting their improved progress. However, staff expectations of pupils' handwriting and the standards of the presentation of their work vary too widely. Consequently, the quality of pupils' handwriting and the presentation of their work in Years 3, 4 and 5 is not good enough.

Teachers are successfully ensuring that children understand what they should be doing in lessons and what they are learning. Teachers also continue to ask pupils well-considered questions to assess their understanding. However, pupils do not have enough opportunities to discuss their ideas and thinking with each other. This is because discussions are too heavily led by the teacher in some lessons. This means that pupils miss opportunities to challenge each other's thinking and to develop their speaking and listening skills. As a result, some pupils become too passive in their learning and do not make good progress in lessons.

Staff have worked together to produce an appropriate school marking policy. There are some innovative strategies in the policy, including 'pupil conferencing' – which involves time being set aside for teachers to mark work alongside pupils to identify and agree improvement targets. Pupil conferencing activities have begun in Year 6 but have not yet started in other year groups. The quality and impact of teachers' marking is stronger in some year groups than in others because not all teachers are fully complying with the new marking policy.

The governing body is determined to play its role in supporting the school's improvement journey. Governors have visited more frequently to observe the work of the school for themselves and have set up a separate committee to focus more closely on the quality of teaching and learning. However, many governors are quite new to their role and lack the skills and experience required to fully hold leaders to account. Minutes from governing body minutes indicate that governors are beginning to ask more questions of senior leaders, but they still do not challenge leaders well enough. An external review of governance is strongly recommended to ensure that governing body development priorities are swiftly identified, so that appropriate training can be arranged for governors.

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 recommend that further action is taken to:

- commission an external review of governance to assess how this aspect of school leadership may be improved
- ensure that teachers improve their strategies to develop pupils' speaking and listening skills in lessons, to further promote pupils' engagement in learning
- improve the consistency of teachers' expectations of pupils' handwriting and the presentation of their work
- ensure that all teachers fully comply with the school's new marking policy.

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

I have agreed to arrange for the headteacher and two other teachers to visit another school, in the Autumn term 2013, to observe outstanding practice in teaching. The visit will focus on teachers' strategies to develop pupils' speaking and listening skills to further promote pupils' engagement in learning.

External support

The local authority has provided good support to the school since the last inspection, and has also allocated some additional funding to the school to support improvement. Senior leaders have welcomed support in strengthening the quality of the school's improvement plan. Effective support has also been provided in brokering partnerships with other local schools recognised for their good and outstanding practice, and in helping leaders to devise a new calculation policy. The local authority has agreed to provide further training to governors to address the findings of the external review of governance, upon its completion. It has also agreed to help the school to develop a high quality handwriting and presentation policy.

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

Yours sincerely

Jeremy Spencer
Her Majesty's Inspector