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19 June 2013

Carole Smith
St Mark's CofE Primary School
High Street
Pensnett
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Dear Mrs Smith

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mark's CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 18 June 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report 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.

During the visit, I held meetings with you, your deputy and the leaders responsible for English, mathematics and special educational needs. I also met with three parents and five members of the Governing Body including the Chair of the Governors. I also met with a representative of the local authority. I scrutinised information about the progress made by pupils, school improvement plans, the minutes of the meetings of the governing body and the schools records of its recent monitoring activity. I made short visits to 11 lessons.

Context

Since the last inspection your acting deputy headteacher has been appointed to the substantive post of deputy headteacher. As a result of the restructuring of the leadership team, two new leaders have been appointed from within the existing staff. One has taken responsibility for Key Stage 1 and the other is leading mathematics.

Main findings

There is clear evidence that pupils are making better progress as a result of the improvements you are making. This is most apparent at Key Stage 2 because pupils are experiencing more good teaching and some that is outstanding. Attainment by the end of Year 6 has risen and is now at the national average. Comparable improvements are evident in the Early Years Foundation Stage because staff in this phase are making the most of a high quality stimulating environment that has been created. You have correctly recognised that the progress pupils make at Key Stage 1 is not quite so impressive. You are taking exactly the right action to remedy this situation.

Teachers' planning has improved so that there is greater clarity about the outcomes for different ability pupils. In the more effective lessons, teachers were observed undertaking very effective reviews of learning; for instance a Year 5 teacher expertly used examples taken from pupils' work to highlight precisely how the class could produce higher quality writing. Marking has improved and you are correct that the next step is to ensure pupils always respond to the targets that are identified. Throughout the school not enough use is made of information communication technologies to aid the effective review of learning; for instance the use of video and 'visualiser' technologies.

Parents appreciate your new website because they have much better access to important information about what is going on in school. You are very sensibly making the most of your involvement in a partnership with six other schools. This is helping you to more rapidly identify the improvements that you are implementing. To improve teaching you have restructured the school to ensure the very good practice that exists is more evenly distributed across year groups. The appointment of an additional leader to take responsibility Key Stage 1 would appear to be very well judged.

Middle leaders are enthusiastic and appreciate the opportunities they are being given to influence the future direction of the school. The plans to involve them more in evaluating teaching are highly appropriate. The Governing Body has good awareness of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The minutes of Governing Body meetings clearly indicate that governors are very focussed on their role of checking that the school is making the improvements that are needed. The recent creation of a school improvement committee is further confirmation of governors' commitment to ensuring the school becomes good before the next inspection. The school's plans are generally comprehensive and include very useful indicators that can be used to check the progress being made in most areas. The school is giving attention to the need to close the gaps in achievement that exist, for instance between pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils. However, the governing body's role in monitoring this is made more difficult by the limited reference to this aspect in the school's improvement plans.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- Ensure improvement plans pay more attention to closing the achievement gaps that exist between different groups.
- Ensure pupils experience more consistently effective reviews of learning through greater use of appropriate information, communication technologies.

External support

Support from the local authority has ensured that the school is far better placed to make the improvements needed. The authority's brokering of a partnership with a nearby outstanding school has been highly instrumental in accelerating the rate of improvement. The authority is also ensuring governors receive effective training and have a source of advice that is independent of the school's senior leadership.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Dudley and the Dioceses of Worcestershire.

Yours sincerely

Kevin Sheldrick
Her Majesty's Inspector