

Tribal
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 311 5359
Direct F 0117 315 0430
Email: christina.bannerman@tribalgroup.com

13 June 2013

Miss Denise White
Headteacher
Palace Wood Primary School
Talbot Road
Allington
Maidstone
ME16 0HB

Dear Miss White

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Palace Wood Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 12 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 March 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Context

Since the inspection that took place in March, you have been absent through sickness. Governors, appointed a full-time interim headteacher to run the school in your absence, whose own school was judged outstanding when it was last inspected by Ofsted. You returned to work just under two weeks ago and the interim headteacher is now continuing to support the school on a part-time basis until the end of this term.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you, the interim headteacher, other senior leaders, two members of the Governing Body, and two representatives of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I also spoke on the

telephone with the Chair and the Vice-Chair of the Governing Body. I evaluated the action plans put together in your absence and the evidence of their impact. You also escorted me on a brief tour of the school.

Main findings

Governors and the interim headteacher, supported by other leaders, have taken decisive action to ensure that no time is wasted in securing improvement.

The first step was to secure an interim headteacher with a proven track record of school improvement. This, governors effectively achieved with the help of the local authority. Other leaders and staff within the school have responded very positively to the interim headteacher's lead. Within a short period she has established a strong team spirit and commitment to rapid improvement.

In your absence, the interim headteacher and governors have put together a robust action plan, with clear measures of success and challenging targets for all. A review of the appraisal system has taken place. Teachers are now accountable for the quality of their teaching as well as the progress their pupils make. This was not previously the case. Governors have begun to use the plan effectively to gauge the effectiveness of actions taken to-date and to call leaders to account. However, with your recent return to work, it is not clear which aspects of the plan you intend to lead yourself. This needs to be clarified quickly, so that governors are then able to evaluate your personal impact on improving teaching and raising standards.

After the inspection, the interim headteacher immediately clarified expectations of all staff, particularly in relation to pupils' progress in lessons. A new system to track pupil's progress has been trialled by members of the leadership team. As a result of its success, a decision has been made to purchase the system and train all staff in its use. Already there is evidence that the system is effective. When the first collection of pupils' assessment information identified under-achievement in writing and mathematics, this triggered additional support for the teachers who need it. Phase leaders are confident that teachers are already benefiting from this approach.

Two new phase leaders are now in post and proving effective. One of these teachers, a specialist in mathematics, is also leading the subject. She has rightly begun work coaching teachers who are identified as needing support and has also made links with a nearby grammar school in order to develop challenging activities for more-able pupils. A mathematics challenge week is scheduled to take place before half-term in which pupils will develop their investigative skills and standards of their work will be accurately assessed. It is helpful that governors and leaders intend to evaluate the impact of this work before the end of term. The other new phase leader is leading the introduction of the new system of tracking pupils' achievement. There are good plans to train staff in the use of this software, the

introduction of which will provide teachers with instant access to pupils' assessment information so that they can plan more effectively to meet pupils' needs.

A range of training and support has been provided for identified staff to help them improve their teaching. Pupils' work is being scrutinised and external moderation has been arranged to help staff develop their confidence and skills to correctly identify at which levels pupils are working. Teachers with whom I spoke found this to be very valuable. Furthermore, links have been made with a strongly performing nearby school and opportunities have already been provided for teachers to visit and learn from best practice.

The structure of the senior staff is under review. With the departure of the part-time post-holder who shared the post of deputy headteacher, governors have rightly challenged the status quo, particularly in the light of the large numbers of staff already employed on the leadership spine within the school. Since your return you have put together proposals for a new way forward. Governors are now considering these with a view to effecting change from September 2013.

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

- ensure that teachers and leaders at all levels, including the substantive headteacher are held fully accountable for improving pupils' achievement
- ensure that teachers are effectively trained in the new system to track pupils' achievement so that assessment information is used effectively to inform their planning and teaching
- ensure that leaders' observations of teaching take full account of the standards of pupils' work and whether or not pupils are meeting the new targets set, identified within the action plans for improvement
- finalise decisions about the senior structure before the end of term
- ensure that the action plans clearly identify a lead role in relation to improving teaching and pupils' achievement for which the substantive headteacher will be held to account.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority is providing strong support. The improvement adviser has had regular contact with the Chair of Governors and the interim headteacher. He has offered good quality support to help build the capacity of identified under-performing teachers who are now participating in a local authority training programme. He has

also brokered visits to stronger schools and opportunities for staff to moderate pupils' work alongside teachers from other schools. The first meeting with you since your return to work took place last week. During the meeting local authority officers clarified their expectations of you to specify within the action plans what role you will personally take in securing improvements in teaching and achievement. Leaders and governors would benefit from further support in establishing clear lines of accountability for leaders at all levels.

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

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer
Her Majesty's Inspector