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Mrs M Ryan
Headteacher
St John's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Infant School, Chatham
4 New Street
Chatham
ME4 6RH

Dear Mrs Ryan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St John's Church of England Voluntary Controlled Infant School, Chatham

Following my visit to your school on 25 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.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you, the governing body and a representative of the local authority. I toured the school with you and briefly observed classes at work. I scrutinised and evaluated school documents, including the school improvement plan, governing body minutes, and data about how much progress pupils make.

Main findings

You have used the inspection report in exactly the right way. It has galvanised action, and you have used the recommendations to make several key improvements quickly. One of these, which is most important, is that you are now sure about how well pupils from all the different groups are doing, using data which is now very well organised. You have used external consultancy very effectively to reach this point.

Staff have received useful further training in making accurate assessments of pupils, and moderation processes indicate that their judgements about the levels at which pupils are working are generally correct. You are rightly considering how better to monitor the progress of pupils who join the school in mid-year.

Pupils' progress is improving in reading, writing and mathematics. No groups of pupils underachieve. However, as at the inspection, pupils' writing is weaker than their reading and mathematics. Pupil premium money is spent carefully, and imaginatively, and the high number of pupils entitled to this funding are achieving as well as the others. This successful position is one that you have worked thoughtfully to achieve. Similarly, the provision for pupils who are disabled or who have special educational needs is being usefully improved and these pupils' achievement is improving too.

You and your staff are working hard to improve teaching, rightly aiming for it to be consistently at least good. You give teachers and teaching assistants useful day-to-day advice, support and management. You make regular, formal, observations in each of the three classes, producing detailed and helpful written reports. However, you do not yet check systematically enough that teachers put in place the improvements that you recommend.

The external review of governance, recommended by the inspection, has been useful in bringing necessary change. Governors have taken the inspection's criticism of their work on the chin. They have thought carefully and begun to improve their work. In our discussion with the Chair of Governors, it was agreed that it would be helpful for your reports to governors, and the information you provide, to link more directly to items on their helpfully revised meeting agendas. This is to assist governors in asking more detailed and challenging questions, which can be recorded in their minutes, to hold the school more sharply to account.

You lead the school well. Your clear view of what the school should be is informed well by your knowledge of the community and the school's history and tradition. You know what matters to people and listen to the advice and opinions of others carefully. You prudently consider what skills new members of staff require to best meet the pupils' needs. You have developed the school as an interesting place for young children. Indoors and outdoors, there are all sorts of carefully-designed nooks and crannies which provide exciting stimuli for learning and play. Pupils enjoy a broad curriculum which gets them involved in the local community. It also takes them further afield, to the beach for example; these are precious experiences.

The inspection pointed out that a few pupils and parents were concerned about rough play. It was hard for you to refute this notion, or put it into context, because the school did not have strong systems for recording and checking on behaviour.

Now you do. The school is pro-active in working with parents. Attendance has risen slightly this year but remains a little below average.

The school improvement plan is a useful working document which successfully promotes the improvements being made. However, as we discussed, it needs clearer success criteria, timescales, and procedures for monitoring and evaluating the impact of the planned actions. This is to speed up improvement and make clear to everyone precisely what needs to be achieved. We agreed, with the Chair of Governors, that governors could be helpfully involved in the monitoring and evaluation.

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:

- record clearly how teachers can further improve their lessons and make sure that, in future lesson observations, senior staff check how successfully the improvements have been made
- ensure the new school improvement plan contains clearer success criteria, timescales and monitoring and evaluation procedures, involving governors
- provide management information to governors which is more closely and directly related to the items on their meeting agendas.

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

You use external support very well, ensuring that people from outside the school know what you need, and have the expertise to be helpful. The local authority lead consultant for the school is highly effective in helping you to develop the management systems needed to bring your clear vision increasingly to fruition.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Diocese of Rochester and the Director of Children's Services for Medway.

Yours sincerely

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector