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Mrs A McGarrigle
Headteacher
St Mary's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
St Mary's Road
Swanley
Kent
BR8 7BU

Dear Mrs McGarrigle

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 26 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 May 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, the deputy headteacher and the Chair of Governors. We also toured the school together, during lesson time, and I looked at some examples of pupils' work. I evaluated some key school documents, including the school improvement plan and minutes of governors' meetings.

Context

At the end of this school year, three of the four class teachers in Key Stage 2 are leaving. Two new appointments have been made, with one still in the process of being finalised.

Main findings

The school faces a very tough challenge to become a good school by May 2015, which is the latest time the next full inspection could happen. This is because the attainment and the progress of pupils, especially in Key Stage 2 and in mathematics, are very low, albeit showing some improvement. Much faster improvement is needed to reach a standard that could be considered good in that timescale.

You and your deputy headteacher understand this and we discussed the issues very usefully together. There are some extenuating circumstances for the current position of the school, in particular the recent turnover of staff. In the short time since the inspection, you have taken some useful steps to move the school forward. One of these is implementing rapidly a new system for checking on pupils' progress. This is beginning to ensure that teachers, rightly, are held more accountable for how well the pupils in their classes do. You have dealt quickly and effectively with the pupil safeguarding recommendation from the inspection.

You have also written a new school improvement plan to address the areas requiring improvement identified by the inspection. This plan is appropriately structured in three areas:

1. Improving teaching
2. Raising achievement in mathematics
3. Improving leadership and management.

However, the plan is not sufficiently geared to the long term. It is not precise or detailed enough. It lacks clear, timed targets and the section on improving teaching does not link well enough to the improvements needed in the progress pupils make. The plan does not show teachers and other members of staff clearly what they must do to improve the pupils' progress. It does not identify all the actions needed to bring about the very swift change needed. In short, it does not explain how the school will ensure it improves rapidly to the next inspection.

You cannot show that the quality of teaching has begun to improve quickly enough since the inspection. One important area for development is to ensure that work set in lessons is consistently challenging and well suited to the needs of each group. Another is that pupils have better opportunities for challenging, practical work in mathematics.

In discussions, together with the local authority and the Chair of Governors, we agreed that a new improvement plan must be written, to be in place and working by the end of September 2013. This needs to be understood by all staff and governors, so that they know what is (and is not) expected of them. Staff performance management targets will need to align to this new plan. We agreed the plan must contain:

- clear overarching targets, showing what will constitute 'good' in terms of pupils' progress, attainment and the quality of teaching by May 2015.
- demanding targets in each of the areas in the first bullet point, for key milestones, or specific dates, on the way May 2015.
- actions to support the achievement of the targets; these need to be timed, allocated to individuals to deliver, with appropriate resourcing and systems for monitoring them and evaluating their impact.
- similarly structured plans for improving mathematics and leadership and management.

We discussed what this plan might look like and what some of the targets and actions might be. We explored how to ensure that it is a working document in which everyone knows their part and which really drives rapid improvement. We agreed that the new plan will be sent to me for checking and agreement and that I will visit the school again once the plan is in action to check how much impact it is making.

You have a very clear vision for the school, which is brought to fruition in many positive ways. There is a strong positive, Christian character to the school. The pupils benefit from a breadth of interesting experiences in the curriculum which motivate them and give them reasons to enjoy school. It was good to see pupils on their way to a residential visit. Attendance is above average.

On our short visits to lessons, I noted that, while pupils were enjoying writing tasks, the quality and style of their formation of letters, and the way they present their work, is inconsistent. This should be addressed through the new improvement plan. The well-presented, useful, data you showed me, about how much progress pupils have made this year, shows that this is inconsistent from class to class and subject to subject. Pupils who are entitled to free school meals do not do as well as their peers, overall, and improving this must be a key priority in the new plan. Your spending of pupil premium funding is sensibly considered but when particular methods make limited impact on the pupils' progress this should be quickly redressed.

The governing body continues to improve its work, recruit new members with useful experience, and to ask more challenging questions of you and the school. The Chair of Governors understands and supports the need for the new approach identified in this letter and is aware of the important role governors must play in ensuring it all happens in a timely and effective way.

Senior leaders and governors are not yet taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- rewrite and implement the school improvement plan (as above)
- ensure new staff are carefully and fully inducted so that they know what is expected of them
- align staff performance management arrangements to the revised improvement plan and provide members of staff with the challenge and support needed to deliver the improvements they need to make.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. When I visit the school, to monitor and support the progress of the school, I am likely to report what I find publicly. I will also ask to meet with the full governing body.

External support

The school is making appropriate use of the local authority support which is offered. It is likely that additional consultant support will be needed to improve teaching, in particular, through the prospective new improvement plan. The local authority is supportive of the approach outlined in this letter, and has decided, sensibly, to visit the school every two weeks, to support and check on its progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector