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Mrs Lyn Holebrook
Headteacher
Etchells Primary School
East Avenue
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Cheadle
Cheshire
SK8 3DL

Dear Mrs Holebrook

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Etchells Primary School, Stockport

Following my visit to your school on 28 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 April 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with yourself and your deputy headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and two other governors, a representative of the local authority, the school adviser and a group of pupils. The school improvement plan, and a selection of subject leader files, was also evaluated.

Context

There have been no significant staff changes since the inspection. However, some major changes are imminent. The headteacher is retiring and the deputy will be in interim charge during the autumn term until a new permanent appointment can be made. A new Chair of the Governing Body has also recently been appointed.

Main findings

The post-Ofsted action plan provides a sound basis for addressing the weaknesses identified by the recent inspection. The plan identifies strategies linked to a comprehensive monitoring schedule. However, this is more strongly focused on monitoring rather than development and specific improvements in the classroom. Links to a programme of professional development aimed at specific improvements in the classroom and in the development of teacher subject knowledge and expertise are not evident. Milestones focus more on monitoring actions taken outcomes rather than outcomes for pupils.

Since the inspection a number of strategies have been established but as yet have not been implemented. For example, there are plans to share and observe good practice among the small group of partner schools. Each teacher is also expected to self-evaluate their practice once each half term and identify at least one target for improvement. In addition each term every teacher is to ask a 'friend' to be a participant observer. On paper, this appears very democratic but it relies on the participant observer being skilled in the process and prepared to challenge when weaker practice is observed. It is unclear how rigorous this process will be. Lesson observation tools have been revised and adopted by the Governing Body to include a more evaluative commentary. This has been extended to monitor the deployment and use of teaching assistants. As yet, neither has been implemented in practice. A new marking and feedback policy is being applied in classrooms and pupils have commented positively on the impact and how this is helping them to improve their work. However, they noted that little else has changed. Teachers still do a lot of the talking in lessons and although different work is set for different groups in their literacy and numeracy lessons, pupils generally all get the same tasks in topics. They were positive about the school and felt happy and secure. As one remarked 'when you walk into the school you have a smile on your face even when it's raining'. However, they did feel that the work could be more challenging as it was only 'occasionally difficult'. Scrutiny of a selection of subject leader files did raise concerns about the quality of the support offered to improve teaching across the full range of subjects. There was a lot of clutter and outdated documentation. Development planning focused on broad organisational or enrichment opportunities rather than on specific strategies to improve classroom practice. For example, developing a link to a school abroad was not connected to any specific detail as to how this would be utilised to improve provision in lessons. Although the school has many positive attributes, weaknesses in practice need to be acknowledged if improvements are to happen quickly. There have been improvements made to policies and processes but there is now an urgent need to ensure that these changes have an impact on improving lessons and outcomes for pupils, especially at Key Stage 2.

Governors recognise that in the past they have not been sufficiently rigorous in holding management to account. The governing body is undergoing transition. A new Chair has been appointed and at the time of this visit new governors were being elected. Most governors have completed training on understanding data and their responsibilities are becoming more clearly defined. They are determined to embrace change and are beginning to become more fully involved in evaluating the work of the school.

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 that the school's own monitoring is secure and that judgements are verified through external sources, including the local authority
- ensure that the school's post Ofsted action plan identifies clear and expected outcomes for pupils as well as specific actions which are designed to improve classroom practice and which are linked to an appropriate programme of professional development
- review and amend this planning in response to on-going evaluation and monitoring
- develop leadership to ensure that work across all subjects allows pupils to progress in their learning and provides quality opportunities for them to practice writing and mathematical skills
- involve all subject leaders in providing ideas, suggestions and resources to improve teaching in their areas of responsibility
- provide further support and training for governors so that they can hold school leaders and teachers 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 school does not make use of the support provided by the local authority but purchases this from an independent provider. This support to date has been focused on supporting yourself in writing your post-Ofsted action plan, reviewing your data, advising on your strategy for raising teaching and improving learning as well as providing training for the governing body. The local authority raised concerns about declining standards at Key Stage 2 but has not had access to the school in order to check on the quality of provision in classrooms. As a result, the school has had no external checks on its own self-evaluation of provision, which was judged to be over optimistic by inspectors in April. In order for the school to be secure in the progress it is making towards good, there is a need for external monitoring which has to be rigorous and provides both critical challenge as well as support.

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

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow

Her Majesty's Inspector