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2 July 2013

Mrs Elisabeth Blanden
Acting Headteacher
St Francis' Catholic Primary School
Queen's Road
Maidstone
ME16 0LB

Dear Mrs Blanden

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Francis' Catholic Primary School, Maidstone

Following my visit to your school on 2 July 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2013.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the acting headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and two other governors, three representatives from the local authority, the consultant headteacher who works with the school and the Director of the Diocese. The local authority's statement of action and the school's action plan were evaluated. The acting headteacher took the inspector on a tour of the school to visit all classes.

Context

Since the inspection, the headteacher has been absent from the school. One class teacher has also been absent since the inspection. The deputy headteacher has been appointed as acting headteacher and another member of the teaching staff has been appointed as acting deputy headteacher. Three governors, including the Chair and Vice Chair, have resigned since the last inspection. A new Chair and Vice Chair have now been elected. There have been several other changes to the governing body.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Leadership and management of the school remain inadequate, although the acting headteacher has brought more stability and direction to the school. She has sensibly restructured leadership roles and responsibilities, creating a new senior team and a better allocation of responsibilities among middle leaders, but this has not yet had sufficient time to make any real impact on achievement or teaching.

The local authority is working closely with the acting headteacher. A consultant headteacher has been supporting the school for two days a week. There have been observations of teaching jointly undertaken with school leaders, work scrutinies to measure progress and to identify improvements in marking and assessment and interviews with pupils. The consultant headteacher has also led training sessions for staff. Records show that marking and some teaching are improving, with an increase in the proportion of good or better lessons. However, the programme of support to improve teaching does not focus in sufficient detail on the areas for improvement in teaching identified at the last inspection.

Five teachers are attending the local authority training programme 'Every Lesson Counts'. A group of teaching assistants are also attending a similar course focused on their role. School leaders have not yet evaluated the impact of these programmes on pupils' progress.

The local authority statement of action focuses on the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. However, there is not enough emphasis on the key priority of improving leadership and management. The statement of action is too general and the programmes of support and success criteria are not tailored to the specific areas for improvement.

The school's action plan does not place enough emphasis on the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. It is not clear from the plan what success in these areas will look like or who will be responsible for monitoring and evaluating improvements. Although the action plan includes achievable milestones, these are not broken down into smaller steps to help school leaders to evaluate pupil progress at regular intervals.

Governors, the local authority and the diocese have focused on the restructuring of the school leadership team and the formation of the new governing body. Improvements to the school have been delayed by the turbulence arising from the changes in school leadership. Nevertheless, the local authority and the Diocese have not acted swiftly enough to strengthen school leadership or support the acting headteacher in her new role. Nearly a term has passed since the inspection and

there are not enough signs of improvement. Actions to improve the school have focused too much on teaching that requires improvement, rather than the immediate and crucial priority of leadership and management, which were judged to be inadequate at the last inspection.

The Diocese has plans in place for the school to become an academy which date from before the last inspection. There is insufficient joint planning and communication between the local authority, the diocese and school leaders. This is not helpful for the school and does not serve the best interests of the pupils. The fragility of leadership and the consequent decline in standards are not being dealt with quickly enough.

Governors have a wide set of relevant skills but little experience of taking a school out of special measures. The new Chair of Governors is rapidly acquiring the necessary expertise: she is astute and aware of what needs to be done. A core group from the governing body have attended some useful training and are committed to challenging the school and driving up standards. They acknowledge that previously they did not realise how much the school was declining because they were not provided with accurate information and did not ask enough of the right questions. Governors require further training and advice from the local authority to help them to perform their role well but this has not yet happened. A small number of governors do not attend meetings regularly and are therefore not performing their role effectively enough to support and challenge the school.

Following the monitoring inspection the following judgements were made:

- The local authority statement of action is not fit for purpose.
- The school's action plan is not fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Kent and the Director of the Archdiocese for Southwark. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector