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Mr Mark Lanyon
Headteacher
St James Church of England Primary School, Handsworth
Sandwell Road
Birmingham
B21 8NH

Dear Mr Lanyon

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St James Church of England Primary School, Handsworth

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

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority. The school improvement plan was evaluated. A range of documentation was reviewed, including the latest information about pupils' progress, feedback to teaching following lesson observations and short visits to lessons, and your revised schedule for checking the quality of teaching. During this visit, you joined me on brief visits to some classes to talk to pupils about their work.

Context

Three temporary teachers will be leaving at the end of this term. The governing body has recruited five new teachers. They will join the school in September 2013. The roles and responsibilities of senior leaders have been reviewed. From September, three senior teachers will be responsible for leading improvements in

Key Stages 1 and 2. Each teacher will also be responsible for supporting teachers within these key stages.

Main findings

You are taking appropriate action to address the areas for improvement identified in the recent inspection. Swift action has been taken to improve the teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make). Pupils explained that they are learning new sounds and making improvements with their reading. They stated that teachers explain activities clearly, help them when they are 'stuck', and use word games to make these lessons fun. As a consequence, younger pupils in the school are becoming more confident at using their understanding of phonics to read unfamiliar words.

Your observations of teaching confirm that the quality of teaching is steadily improving across the school. Teachers are getting better at planning activities which are matched to the needs of pupils of different abilities. In mathematics for instance, more-able pupils are increasingly asked to use their knowledge of number to solve more complex problems, as seen during brief visits to lessons. The pupils I spoke with confirmed that their activities are more interesting and that they are encouraged to find out things for themselves. Very occasionally, pupils who need extra help are not provided with the right resources. For example, in one lesson we visited, pupils were not able to read the information provided by the teacher because it is too difficult. In a few lessons, we found that pupils did not have enough time to work in groups or independently because the teachers took too long to explain activities.

Appropriate support from a number of local schools has enabled you and the other senior leaders to strengthen the systems for checking the quality of pupils' learning and the quality of teaching. You, together with other senior leaders have identified the pupils that are not making sufficient progress and are taking appropriate action to help these pupils make faster progress. When observing teachers, you are placing a greater emphasis on the progress of different groups of pupils. You are providing teachers with some helpful guidance and the actions teachers need to take to help improve their practice. You recognise that all senior leaders need to check carefully that teachers consistently implement the actions that have been identified.

The members of the governing body continue to meet regularly and ask appropriate questions about the progress of pupils and the quality of teaching. In order to keep up-to-date with the actions that you and senior leaders are taking, members of the 'standards and improvement' committee have quite rightly allocated an extra monthly meeting. At this meeting they will discuss and review the school improvement plan. Although you provide governors with detailed information about pupils' progress, it is not always concisely presented. This makes it difficult for them to verify the impact you and other senior leaders are having on the progress of

different groups. Governors acknowledge the need to more regularly visit the school so that they can check how well pupils are learning for themselves.

The school improvement plan appropriately focuses on the actions that will be taken to raise achievement and strengthen teaching. It does not provide details of the actions that will be taken to better meet the needs of pupils who need extra help.

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:

- make sure that all teachers provide pupils who need extra help with the right resources, and ensure that pupils in all classes are more fully involved in lessons
- ensure that all senior leaders check carefully that all teachers consistently implement the actions that have been identified following monitoring
- simplify the presentation of pupil progress information, so that governors can check more carefully check the impact of senior leader's actions on different groups of pupils.

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 a suitable level of support. Senior leaders and teachers are benefiting from visits to and support from a number of local schools. This work is contributing to improvements in teaching and the systems for checking pupils' progress and the work of teachers. You are also making effective use of links with local schools. For instance, training has been planned for teachers to help them better meet the needs of pupils who need extra help. The local authority will be carrying out a review of governance in September 2013 and a full review of pupils' learning, the quality of teaching and leadership before the end of February 2014.

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

Yours sincerely

Usha Devi
Her Majesty's Inspector