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Mrs J O'Neill
Headteacher
St Mary's Church of England Primary School, Balderstone
Oldham Road
Rochdale
Lancashire
OL11 2HB

Dear Mrs O'Neill

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's Church of England Primary School, Balderstone, Rochdale

Following my visit to your school on 12 July 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 May 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During the visit I held meetings with you, the deputy who has been appointed as permanent headteacher from September and the headteacher of the school that will be supporting St Mary's next year. I also met with two members of the governing body including the Chair of Governors, the phase leaders for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, representatives of the local authority and a group of Year 6 pupils.

I looked at a number of documents including the school's post Ofsted action plans, the local authority's support plan and the minutes of governing body meetings, held since the inspection. I also scrutinised the work in children's books to determine the quality of teachers' marking and the standard of pupils' writing.

Context

Since the previous inspection the leadership of the school has been reviewed. You will relinquish your post as executive headteacher at the end of the summer term and return, full-time, to your own school in September. The current deputy headteacher has been appointed to the permanent post of headteacher from the start of the autumn term and a new deputy headteacher will be joining the school at the same time. You have taken swift

action to increase staffing in Key Stage 1 to help bring about improvements in the teaching of writing. An administrator has been appointed to the team responsible for the school's business functions. Due to the unavoidable absence of one of the school's middle leaders, the current deputy headteacher has been given additional responsibility and as a result this is temporarily limiting leadership capacity.

Main findings

There is unanimous agreement among senior leaders, governors and the local authority that the recent inspection report is an accurate description of the effectiveness of the school. They agree that the areas for improvement are correct and have galvanised them into taking rapid action to secure necessary improvements.

Senior leaders, with support from the local authority have taken effective steps to:

- share the good practice that already exists in the school, among all teachers, about what works best in the classroom
- implement a plan to provide pupils with more opportunities to write at length in order to help them develop their writing skills
- improve the frequency of marking with the expressed intention of also improving its quality
- introduce more rigorous monitoring of the quality of teaching with an initial focus on how well teachers are increasing the level of challenge for more able pupils
- provide a programme of training for governors to help sharpen their understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Senior leaders have adopted a range of strategies to improve the quality of teaching. For example teachers work in groups of three to plan lessons together and then evaluate the quality of each other's teaching by observation. They then meet and discuss what they have learned about what constitutes effective classroom practice. Although this strategy has only been in place for a short time there is evidence of its positive impact. For example teachers are giving pupils more opportunities to extend their writing. Teachers providing pupils with a range of appropriate stimuli to fire their imaginations and inspire them to write at length. As a result the quality of pupils' writing is improving.

Senior leaders monitoring of teaching is regular and they use a range of strategies to collect evidence to determine its quality. These include making short visits to lessons to evaluate, for example, how well teachers are challenging more able pupils. They also scrutinise the work done in pupils' books and monitor teachers' planning. Consequently staff are now more accountable for the quality of their work in the classroom. However, senior leaders need to adopt a more rigorous approach to monitoring the quality of teaching in lessons. Currently they do not place enough emphasis on measuring the impact that teaching is having on pupils' progress.

The governors have recently approved a revised marking policy for use by all staff. Although pupils' books are marked regularly other aspects of the policy are not being consistently applied. Some teachers' comments on pupils' work do not provide enough information about what the pupil has done well and what they need to do to improve. Consequently opportunities are missed for pupils to learn from their mistakes.

Senior leaders have put together a series of plans to address the areas for improvement identified in the report. Although the individual plans are having an impact on school

improvement they are unconnected and have not been drawn together into a well-defined whole school strategy for improvement. Consequently, it is not clear what the order of school improvement priorities are or whether the time-scales in each plan are realistic. The measures of success which governors will use to assess the progress of the plans are not sharp enough. There is too little emphasis on the intended impact that planned actions will have on pupils' achievement.

The formal review of governance, as expressed in the most recent inspection report, has yet to be carried out. None the less governors have already begun to evaluate their working practices. With the help of the local authority they have reviewed the structure of governors' committees in readiness for implementing the new structure in September. As a group they have undertaken training to secure their understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a governing body. Since the inspection they have become regular visitors to the school and collected evidence, first hand, on school effectiveness. Consequently they are now better prepared to hold leaders and managers to account for the efficient operation of the school and the standards achieved by the pupils.

Having viewed the available evidence I consider that senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. However the school should take further action to:

- increase the rigour of the monitoring of teaching so that when lessons are observed, observers make a judgement on the impact that teaching is having on pupils' progress
- make sure that all teachers implement the school's marking policy so that pupils are clear about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve
- ensure that the school's separate action plans are brought together into one whole school development plan with a clear order of priorities; enabling governors to measure the impact of actions taken to improve the school
- ensure that the formal review of governance, as recommended in the report is carried out.

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's leaders and managers are receiving effective assistance from the local authority. There is a detailed plan in place which describes the support the school is receiving to address the areas for improvement identified by inspectors. The local authority has also brokered a link with a local school so that from September the head and governors of that school will help strengthen the leadership of St Mary's.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Rochdale and the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Manchester.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector