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15 July 2013

Mrs Gillian Bainbridge
Headteacher
Montalbo Nursery and Primary School
Fairfield Road
Barnard Castle
County Durham
DL12 8TN

Dear Mrs Bainbridge

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Montalbo Nursery and Primary School, Durham

Following my visit with David Brown, Her Majesty's Inspector, 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 the headteacher, who is also the literacy co-ordinator, the deputy headteacher, who is the numeracy and assessment coordinator and the lead for the Early Years Foundation Stage. I also met with pupils, members of the governing body and with a representative of the local authority. We discussed the action taken since the last inspection to tackle the areas requiring improvement. I looked at a range of documentation including the school's post-Ofsted action plan. There was also a tour of the school conducted by the headteacher and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

One member of staff is due to leave the school at the end of the summer term 2013. A member of staff currently covering a maternity leave is due to leave at the end of this term as the colleague on leave returns.

Main findings

The leadership of the school has taken effective action since the inspection to improve the quality and consistency of teaching. The governing body has set up a core group made up of governors and senior staff to co-ordinate and monitor the school's progress against the post inspection action plan. This group meets regularly and individual governor members take responsibility for particular areas of the plan and are beginning to assess the impact of the actions being taken. For example, the school rightly sees the scrutiny of pupils' books as a vital aspect when making judgements about the impact of teaching on pupils' progress. A designated governor works alongside senior staff to oversee this. Books are scrutinised weekly and a random work scrutiny takes place at every staff meeting. The link governor is able to report progress in this area to the full governing body.

The post inspection action plan is detailed and identifies all the important areas that need improvement. However, the plan should be clearer about what needs to be done, by when and what success looks like. While leaders and governors have already begun to address these matters, they need to accelerate the process. This can be done by identifying 'milestones' along the way for each aspect of the plan so that leaders, staff and governors have a clear understanding of the progress being made and their respective roles in checking what is being done.

An important element of improving the quality and consistency of teaching is sharing best practice both within the school and with other schools. Supported by the local authority, the school has moved quickly to seek out best practice in other schools and learn from it. There have been visits to and from a pair of outstanding local schools. During these visits there have been shared observations of lessons by senior staff and comparisons of the assessment of pupils' written work. Both of these activities have given staff at the school clearer insights into the elements that make up consistently high quality teaching which is rooted in high expectation. Staff have been heartened by their growing confidence in the accurate assessment of pupils' work. These experiences need to be extended. All staff from the school should be given opportunities to observe effective practice both in school and in other schools.

Pupils continue to be secure and happy at school. As one pupil said, 'When I am here, I feel like I am at home'. This is a very positive reflection on the school. Pupils said that they felt that their views, particularly when it came to planning their work, were sought more often since the inspection. They also said that they had more opportunities to write at length. Pupils welcomed the time teachers and teaching assistants spent with them individually and in groups. They welcomed detailed marking and the opportunities that this brought to engage in dialogue with their teachers. Pupils know at what levels they are working and what they need to do to improve.

Governors show their heightened ambition for the school through their clear sense of what they need to do and their increasingly clear understanding about their role in setting the strategic direction for the school and then making informed judgements about its progress. However, further steps should be taken to ensure that governors are clearer about the roles and responsibilities of senior staff within the school and the part they play in assuring the quality of teaching. This could be done through, for example, senior staff attending governors' meetings to describe their work and show where there is demonstrable impact on pupils' progress.

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 action plan is carefully and regularly monitored to in order judge the impact of the school's work on pupil progress
- continue to develop the roles and expertise of senior and middle leaders to enable them to be held accountable for developments in their areas of responsibility
- draw on the developing partnerships with successful local schools, to give all teachers more opportunities to observe outstanding teaching and learning.

Ofsted will 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 has moved effectively to support the school. A link officer is supporting the leadership and governors in sharpening plans for improvement. The officer will continue to visit the school on a regular basis to track progress and has agreed to monitor and assess the progress being achieved prior to a future visit from Her Majesty's inspector. A successful local school, Ramshaw Primary, is supporting the staff of the school in developing the leadership's expertise in lesson observation, the use of data and the moderation of pupils' work.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Evans

Her Majesty's Inspector