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Mrs Jennifer Barnett
The Mary Towerton School
Beacons Bottom
Studley Green
High Wycombe
Buckinghamshire
HP14 3XG

Dear Mrs Barnett

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Mary Towerton School

Following my visit to your school on Friday 13 September 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 June 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

The headteacher is taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection.

The governing body is not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and the governors' action plan is not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- strengthen governors' understanding of their role in supporting and challenging the school to become good at its next inspection
- ensure that governors' roles in driving improvement are clearly set out in an action plan which has specific timescales, which details what success will look like and which goes beyond the basic requirements of governance.

The local authority should take immediate action to:

- follow up on the governing body's response to the findings of the National Leader of Governance and monitor this to ensure that governors build on this with sufficient urgency and clarity
- help the school to recruit experienced governors.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. We visited every classroom and looked briefly at lessons, as well as displays, books and resources. I also scrutinised documentation relating to school improvement, such as governing body minutes, a governors' action plan and records of lesson observations.

Context

Two teachers and three teaching assistants joined the school in September, one of whom is part time, working three days in Year 1, with you teaching the remaining two days.

Main findings

You have implemented a range of good strategies for improvement in response to the Ofsted report. Visits to classrooms showed early evidence that teachers and teaching assistants are providing more opportunities for pupils to write and to develop good handwriting. These include self-directed activities as well as those supported by adults. Even at this very early stage in the term, pupils' books show that teachers are taking a more consistent approach to marking, with good examples of pupils being helped to use capital letters and full stops in their writing and to spell correctly.

You have improved systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and stepped up their frequency this term. Weekly evaluations of lessons and of teachers' planning show you challenging staff to ensure that all pupils are making good progress, whatever their starting points. Displays around the school reinforce higher expectations of good literacy and presentation skills. Learning areas now include dedicated spaces which encourage a stronger focus on reading, writing and mathematics.

Action planning to drive and monitor improvements in teaching and learning is detailed and thorough. Your good working partnership with the local authority adviser has helped keep actions sharp and well-focused on the right priorities. A timeline for developments shows an appropriate sense of urgency about becoming a good school.

In contrast, the Governing Body's actions are less well focused or clear. Governors have undertaken the initial stages of an external review, but the resulting action plan does not go far enough beyond fundamental expectations of governance, such as ensuring that statutory policies are in place and keeping consistent records of meetings. They have not made good or extensive enough use of the expertise offered by the external reviewer, nor have they set up future activities to build on her work with them. Timings for their actions are too often not specified, or are listed, too vaguely, as 'ongoing'. Governors remain heavily reliant on you to provide them with information about how the school is performing, but have not yet done enough to develop their skills in questioning and challenging the information you give them. They have produced well-intentioned systems for visiting lessons and reporting back, but these are not backed up by a strong enough grasp of how to use such visits to inform their thinking about the strategic direction and effectiveness of the school. Governors vary in their acceptance of how far the school has to change before its next inspection; this is preventing them from driving improvement in a consistent and united way. They are further impeded by vacancies on the governing body which are proving difficult to fill.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

I will arrange to visit the school again, to coincide with the next governors' meeting, to evaluate actions taken in response to this inspection.

External support

You benefit greatly from tightly-focused support from the local authority adviser. This is a constructive and challenging relationship, helping to keep the school keenly focused on the right priorities for improvement. The local authority has brokered support for governors by providing a National Leader of Governance to undertake the external review, but officers agree that governors have not yet made enough of this opportunity.

You are well supported by links with other schools that are performing well. The local authority is ready to support an additional link with a local outstanding school. You, rightly, intend to use this in a limited and focused way, so that you are not overloaded or distracted from the core business of improving your school.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector