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21 October 2013

Mr R Richards
St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School
Tong Lane
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Lancashire
OL13 9LJ

Dear Mr Richards

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School, Bacup

Following my visit to your school on 18 October 2013 with Mary Varley HMI, 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.

This visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in July 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Having considered all of the evidence I am of the opinion that senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- Significantly refine the school development plan by reducing the number of priorities in it; focusing on those that will have the greatest impact on pupils' outcomes.
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each member of the senior leadership team and hold them rigorously to account for the impact of their work.
- Ensure that senior leaders and governors inject a sense of urgency into tackling the areas for improvement identified at the most recent inspection and as a consequence accelerate the pace of change.

- Maximise the impact of the link that has been brokered with a local outstanding primary school by being clear about what support this school can provide to enable St Mary's to meet its most pressing needs.
- Bring all marking up to the quality of the best in the school so that all pupils receive high quality feedback from their teachers and are given opportunities to respond and so learn from their mistakes.

Evidence

During the visit I held meetings with you and two other senior leaders. I also held discussions with representatives from the local authority, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Salford and the headteacher from a local outstanding school who has been commissioned to provide you and your colleagues with support to address each of the areas for improvement in the inspection report. I also held a separate meeting with the Chair of Governors and the Chair of the Governing Body's Resources Committee. I also met a group of Year 6 pupils. During this meeting they expressed, eloquently, their thoughts about the school and eagerly shared with me the work in their books. I spent time analysing the school's post inspection development plan and the minutes of governors' meetings held since the inspection. I also looked at the work in books from pupils in Years 3 and 5 to evaluate the quality of teachers' marking. You also accompanied my colleague and I on a tour of the school, which gave us the opportunity to observe the quality of teaching in each key stage.

Context

Since the inspection you have made a number of adjustments to the way staff are deployed in the school and how pupils are grouped in Key Stage 2. You have changed the way classes are organised in Years 3, 4 and 5 and have moved from having three separate classes to two mixed groups. One group is made up of pupils from Years 3 and 4 and the other, pupils from Years 4 and 5. Due to the unavoidable absence of three permanent members of staff the governors have had to employ three teachers on a temporary basis.

Main findings

Senior leaders, governors, representatives of the local authority and the Diocese of Salford concur with the findings of the most recent inspection. There is unanimous agreement among this group of key stakeholders that the school requires improvement. In response to the inspection judgement you have written a development plan describing how each of the areas for improvement, as identified in the inspection report, will be addressed. Although the plan is detailed it lacks precision. The targets to improve the school are not in an order of priority and so it is unclear which are the most important to tackle first. A number of targets do not relate to the strategic development of the school but are lists of tasks that staff are

expected to do regularly. As result some aspects of the plan are related to peripheral activities, diverting attention away from those actions that will have the greatest impact on pupils' outcomes. Senior leaders' responsibilities for key areas of the plan are not clear which limits their accountability. Consequently this lack of clarity has resulted in leaders and managers not tackling improvements quickly enough to try and ensure that the school will be judged at least good at its next inspection.

Senior leaders' judgements about what constitutes effective teaching are not secure. Consequently you and your colleagues have not been able to use the evidence gathered from lesson observations to clearly identify which aspects of teaching need the most attention to bring about much needed improvements. As a result plans to improve the quality of teaching and learning lack precision and are having too little impact. This was brought sharply into focus during our tour of the school. In those lessons visited in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 there was little evidence of work being appropriately matched to pupils needs. For example in one upper Key Stage 1 class the writing activity was not challenging enough for more able pupils and the weakest pupils were given no support. As a consequence the progress made by both groups was too slow. Where teaching was weak pupils displayed poor attitudes to learning; lacking enthusiasm when lessons failed to inspire them.

Pupils' books are marked regularly by their teachers but the quality of that marking is not consistent between different year groups. The best quality marking provides pupils with information about what they have done well and what they need to do to improve their work. For example in Year 6 literacy books the teacher highlights work of good quality in one colour and that which requires improvement in another. The pupils then follow up the teacher's comments the following morning. The Year 6 pupils I spoke to said how highly they valued their teacher's work in this regard and the positive impact it is having on their progress. However, such incisive and informative marking is not the case in all the books seen during my visit. Some teachers' comments do not place enough emphasis on what needs to be done to improve the work and as a result pupils are given insufficient information to learn from their mistakes. In addition some comments contain spelling errors and are therefore not modelling good practice in English.

A number of pupils expressed concern about the way some staff manage behaviour at lunchtime saying that punishments can be too harsh. When this happens they feel unfairly treated.

Senior leaders and governors have improved the quality of the teaching environment. Classrooms are clean and clutter free. Wall displays have been refreshed and titles and captions are free of spelling mistakes and inaccuracies in punctuation. Governors have taken decisive steps towards securing finance, and with the agreement of the local authority, use it to remodel parts of the school. For example plans are in place to bring the separate Reception Year and Nursery classrooms together into one specialised teaching space. The intention is to enable staff to share their expertise and ensure that children in the Early Years Foundation

Stage have access to all the available resources, including the well-designed space for outdoor learning.

Governors have provided senior leaders with appropriate support in their endeavours to improve the school and were doing so prior to the inspection. However they are now acutely aware that they need to provide a greater degree of challenge to you and members of your team in order to accelerate the pace of change.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. However, in view of my concerns about the insufficiency of the actions being taken to improve the school I will make arrangements with you to return to the school, as soon as possible, in order to meet with the full governing body.

External support

Since the most recent inspection the local authority has brokered a link between St Mary's and a local outstanding school. This is providing you with management support from the headteacher and opportunities have been taken by your colleagues to visit this other school to observe good practice in the classroom. However, the overall aims for this link have yet to be clarified and as a result the link has had insufficient impact.

The local authority was already aware of the issues identified by inspectors at the most recent inspection and as a result their monitoring and intervention team has been working with the school for some time. In 2013 this led to improvements in attainment at the end of Key Stage 2, in writing and mathematics but standards in reading remained low. However, overtime the monitoring and intervention team has been unable to secure essential improvements in the leadership and management of the school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Education for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Salford and the Director of Children's Services for Lancashire.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector