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Mrs Susie Bagnall
Headteacher
St Ebbe's Church of England Aided Primary School
Whitehouse Road
Oxford
OX1 4NA

Dear Mrs Bagnall

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Ebbe's Church of England Aided Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 23 October 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 third monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Despite increasingly well-focused challenge from the governing body, senior leaders are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. The school should take immediate action to:

- take an uncompromising stance when teaching is not good enough so that it improves faster and inconsistencies are eradicated
- make more regular and better-focused checks on: the quality of teaching; the quantity and quality of work in pupils' books; and the quality and impact of marking and assessment
- ensure that all senior leaders intervene immediately where weaknesses are uncovered and are all highly, and equally, influential in improving teachers' practice

- strengthen the impact of the senior leadership team, so that senior teachers, including the headteacher, become less reliant on external support
- ensure that the performance management process is used rigorously to set high expectations of all staff and to improve performance rapidly.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, the deputy headteacher, members of the governing body, a consultant headteacher working on behalf of the local authority, and a representative of the diocese, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I visited a range of classes, accompanied by you and/or the deputy headteacher. I read a range of school improvement documents, including minutes of governing body meetings and reports written by external partners supporting the school.

Main findings

You have achieved a shift in the culture of the school, in that staff are more ready to accept the need for change than in the past. You accept the weaknesses identified at the last inspection and have improved the school's plans to tackle them. The governing body is challenging you hard on the impact of these plans. Minutes of their meetings show that they are demanding evidence of improvement and insisting that actions are closely aligned to the Raising Achievement Plan, so that they can evaluate their relevance and effectiveness more easily. They are right to insist on this tighter monitoring and evaluation and right to question whether teaching is improving fast enough. The evidence of this inspection visit is that it is not.

You are very well supported by the consultant headteacher appointed by the local authority. He brings a fresh pair of eyes to the school and this helps to focus your attention on what needs to change and to uncover shortcomings. Senior teachers are further supported by literacy and numeracy specialists from the local authority; the diocesan education officer is working alongside you to develop leadership skills in the senior team.

You and your senior team are responsive to issues raised by each of these support partners, but you do not demonstrate the necessary capacity to work effectively without them. You react to issues they raise, but are not yet pro-active enough in finding and resolving them for yourselves. You know what needs to be done to improve teaching, but our joint observations of lessons showed that there are still inconsistencies and weaknesses in practice. For example, some teachers still do not take enough account of pupils' starting points when planning their lessons. Some very bright pupils are given work that is too easy for them and teachers do not identify this quickly enough or adapt the lesson to increase challenge.

There is some good practice. Pupils in a Year 5 class made good progress in mathematics because they were given tasks well suited to their abilities. Marking in this class showed that the teacher picks up misconceptions and supplies well-chosen additional problems to help individuals grasp the mathematics. Pupils, in turn, entered into conversations about their work. All this had a highly positive effect on individual progress. In sharp contrast, however, mathematics marking elsewhere showed a failure to correct basic arithmetical errors, offering ticks and stars to work showing mistakes in times tables. Such obvious inconsistencies of approach and understanding are a barrier to the school's improvement. They show that pupils are not making enough progress.

Some classes simply have not covered enough work to show good progress in literacy skills, or to make assessment worthwhile. You expressed your disappointment in the quality, quantity and marking in some books; you acknowledge that if senior leaders were checking work routinely and thoroughly, failings would be tackled before they reach your attention or that of an external monitor.

You are strengthening your approach to the management of teachers' performance. Pay progression is no longer automatic and will instead depend on staff showing sound evidence of having met their improvement targets. There is helpful consensus amongst you, the governing body and other senior leaders about the need to use the performance management system as a lever for faster and more sustained improvements in teaching and leadership. This point in the school year, as the appraisal cycle begins, is the ideal time to implement more stringent checks on performance.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector