

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 1231231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566933
Direct F 01695 729320
Direct email:
ggleaden@cfbt.com



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Mrs Verna Marsh
Headteacher
St James CofE Primary School, Ashton-under-Lyne
Romney Street
Ashton-Under-Lyne
Lancashire
OL6 9HU

Dear Mrs Marsh

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St James CofE Primary School, Ashton-under-Lyne, Tameside

Following my visit to your school on 7 November 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 September 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

After having reviewed all of the evidence made available to me 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. The school should take immediate action to:

- improve the quality of teaching so that all groups of pupils make rapid and sustained progress
- revise the way that mathematics is taught so that pupils are suitably challenged, given opportunities to carry out investigations and solve problems in real life contexts
- improve the quality of teachers' marking so that pupils are in no doubt about what they need to do to improve their work and are given time to make the necessary corrections
- improve the strategy for observing the quality of teaching; making sure that observers place greater emphasis on evaluating the impact that teaching is having on pupils' learning and progress
- ensure that the monitoring of pupils' progress is used to quickly identify those pupils who are underachieving and that rapid action is then taken to help them get back on track

- sharpen the school development plan so that the targets for improvement are in an order of priority and it is clear which should be tackled first. In addition, make sure that the plan contains suitable milestones so that leaders, managers and governors are able to monitor and evaluate the progress being made against each of the targets in it.

Evidence

During my visit I held meetings with you and the deputy headteacher, the teachers who have responsibility for coordinating the teaching of literacy and numeracy across Key Stage 2 and two representatives of the local authority. I also met with the Chair of the Governing Body and the person commissioned by the local authority to review the work of the governing body. I spoke with a delightful group of Year 6 pupils who were eager to share with me their thoughts about the school and show me the work in their books. I also examined the work in a sample of books from pupils in Year 3 and Year 5. This allowed me to consider how well the work was matched to pupils' ability and also the quality of marking. I scrutinised the school development plan, which has been rewritten in response to the outcomes of the most recent inspection. In addition I analysed the school's test and assessment results for 2013 and I also evaluated the school's current achievement data. You accompanied me on a tour of the school where we made a number of short visits to lessons.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection a new Chair of the Governing Body has been appointed. There have also been some staff changes. A teaching assistant has left the school and another is unavoidably absent. One of the subject leaders is leaving St James' at the end of term to take a post elsewhere. The school has recently accepted an invitation to join the project, 'Hallé Shine on Manchester'. This initiative is enabling the school, in partnership with the Hallé Orchestra, to hold workshops on Saturday mornings. The aim of these workshops is to help targeted pupils improve their literacy and numeracy through music.

Senior leaders have taken the decision to group pupils by ability in mathematics. The purpose of this is to enable teachers to plan more closely to meet the needs of pupils in this subject with the aim of improving achievement. However, this strategy has not been in place long enough to assess its impact on pupils' outcomes.

The school has a longstanding link with a local primary school, judged good at its most recent Ofsted inspection, which enables the sharing of good practice.

Main findings

Following the September inspection updated school assessment and test results have become available. In 2013 pupils' attainment at Key Stage 1 in reading and mathematics improved to broadly in line with the national figure after being significantly below it in 2012. Encouragingly, the attainment of pupils entitled to free school meals and those with special needs also improved and was above that of their peers across the country.

The results at the end of Key stage 2 in Year 6 in 2013 were disappointing. After being broadly average for the previous two years attainment in reading and mathematics declined to significantly below average. Similarly, the results in the new English Grammar test were also significantly below average. Girls, pupils entitled to free school meals and middle ability pupils significantly underachieved in 2013.

During our tour of the school we made a number of short visits to lessons. In some of these lessons teachers adopted a 'one-size-fits-all' approach with pupils being given the same task. In one lesson, for example, exploring new technology the pupils were given the same resources and had to carry out identical activities. The written materials provided for the pupils were challenging for all but the best readers and as a result some pupils found it difficult to engage with the learning. Evidence from the scrutiny of pupils' books and our observations of some mathematics lessons indicates that teaching in this subject is often uninspiring, with teachers not moving learning on quickly enough. There is little evidence that teachers take opportunities to strengthen pupils' skills in mathematics by giving them the chance to solve a wide range of problems set in real life contexts. Consequently pupils are not being challenged sufficiently to think deeply about the subject in order to foster their mathematical confidence and strengthen their understanding.

Senior leaders have recently introduced a new marking policy. As a result pupils' work is assessed regularly and teachers indicate what pupils have done well and what they need to do to improve. However, the implementation of this policy needs strengthening. There are examples of teachers' feedback not being sharp enough and instances of pupils not correcting work when they have been asked to do so. As a result pupils are not taking advantage of the opportunities given to them to learn from their mistakes.

Although leaders and managers regularly observe teaching, to monitor its quality, these observations lack precision. They place too much emphasis on what the teacher is doing and not enough on the impact that teaching is having on learning. Consequently senior leaders' evaluation of the quality of teaching and the progress that pupils make in lessons is not reliable.

The half-termly checking of pupils' progress, introduced since the inspection, has enabled you and your colleagues to monitor the achievement of the different groups of pupils in the school far more closely. The data being collected indicates that the progress made by pupils since the start of this academic year has not been rapid enough to overcome the legacy of underachievement, particularly at Key Stage 2. There is a lack of clarity as to how pupils who are identified as underachieving will be supported to help them get back on track.

The school development plan, written in response to the findings of the section 5 inspection is detailed. Targets are linked to the areas for improvement in the inspection report and strategies for monitoring and evaluating the plan are in place. However, the plan is not sharp enough. There is a lack of clarity about the order of priorities and which are the most important ones to tackle first. In addition there are too few milestones against which senior leaders and governors will be able to check and evaluate the progress being made towards achieving each of the targets in the plan.

A review of governance is currently being undertaken. This is resulting in governors providing much greater challenge to senior leaders; holding them to account for the work of the school. A new committee of governors, the interim strategic group, has been given the responsibility for monitoring the school development plan in order to try and 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.

External support

Prior to the most recent inspection the local authority carried out a review of the school and identified that the quality of teaching required improvement. As a result senior leaders began receiving support from a local authority school improvement officer. In addition the local authority brokered the link with a local successful school to facilitate the sharing of good practice. However, even with this support in place the rate of improvement has been slow and leaders and managers have not responded quickly enough to make the necessary changes.

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

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector