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11 November 2013

Rosie Phillips
Acting Headteacher
Hawridge and Cholesbury Church of England School
Hawridge
Chesham
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Dear Mrs Phillips

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Hawridge and Cholesbury Church of England School

Following my visit to your school on 11 November 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 September 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The local authority should take further action to:

- evaluate the strength and capacity of the governing body via the planned review of governance, or earlier
- ensure that the governing body has the capability and capacity to drive improvement quickly to a judgement of 'good' and to support school leaders in securing staffing and financial stability.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and the acting executive headteacher, members of the governing body, and representatives of the local authority, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school and local authority improvement plans and read other documents related to school improvement,

including minutes of governing body meetings. I visited all classrooms and observed learning in all year groups.

Context

Since the inspection three new members of staff have joined the school, in Reception and Year 1. A part-time teacher has increased her time in school to provide additional intervention, particularly targeting small groups of pupils in Year 2. The headteacher and deputy headteacher are both on maternity leave. You joined the school as acting headteacher in September. You work alongside the acting executive headteacher, who has been seconded part-time from his own school since February 2013.

Main findings

The governing body has taken appropriate steps, supported by the local authority, to stabilise staffing, particularly at headship level. It still faces the challenge of ensuring, longer term, that the school is effectively led and that all teaching is of a reliably and consistently high quality. It has faced complex and challenging staffing issues, some of which remain unresolved, over the past year. The current headship arrangements, while effective, are not permanent, and this calls into question the school's long term capacity for sustained improvement. The cost of headteacher secondments also places particular strain on school finances and is therefore not supportable long term. Governors are working hard to address this and to ensure that, as a team, they have the necessary skills and robust systems to secure improvement quickly. They have streamlined committee structures so that they are better able to take decisions quickly and have recruited new governors, whose skills and expertise have strengthened the team. However, governors are extensively supported by local authority officers, including of a very senior level. The capacity of the governing body to secure the necessary improvements, without this level of support, is unproven. The planned full review of the governing body will allow the local authority to judge whether further steps are needed to secure effective governance.

Together with the acting executive headteacher, you are effectively focused on improving the quality of teaching across the school. Your analysis of what needs to change and improve is sharp and accurate. This is reflected in school improvement planning, which is detailed and well-targeted. You have developed a strong working partnership with the local authority monitoring officer, who brings additional challenge and a fresh perspective on the quality of teaching and pace of change. Your calm but authoritative attention to the detail of teaching is complemented well by the skills and drive of the executive headteacher, who has a clear view of the strategic development of the school. Your effective partnership is making sure that teachers understand what they need to do to improve learning for all pupils.

During my visit we saw, in most classrooms, that teachers are making good use of advice about better mathematics teaching. For example, in Year 5, pupils worked on a range of tasks which had been well planned to challenge different levels of ability. In Year 6, bright pupils explained how they were matching fractions of the same value but with different denominators. They found the task difficult, but persisted, and showed resilience in working out answers.

Not all teaching has an equally good impact on learning. Sometimes children in early years do not learn as much as they could from their play, because it is not planned or structured well enough. For example, some children had fun making mathematical shapes out of marshmallows and cocktail sticks, but could have been challenged to develop their thinking and explanations further.

Sometimes teachers have planned varied activities with the best of intentions, but do not manage them well enough to make sure that no time is wasted and that every child is stretched by what they are given to do. However, your analysis of where this was more, or less, successful, was strong. You know what still needs to improve. Records show that you are monitoring the quality of teaching and the progress pupils make closely. You are rightly concentrating on teachers' overall skills, but with a drive to improve writing and mathematics in particular. You have overhauled assessment, especially of younger children, to ensure that it is more accurate than in the past. The Executive Headteacher monitors and moderates assessment, using comparisons with other schools to make sure that achievement is accurately measured from the outset and that the rate of progress picks up.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. Specifically, I will return to the school in the spring term to check on the outcomes of the review of governance and on whether improvements to teaching and learning are being sustained.

External support

The school is very well supported by the local authority in the form of the Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, by the seconded headteachers and by links with other schools. The Governing Body has benefited from the expertise of a senior local authority officer, whose advice has helped develop better systems of governance. However, this level of support is too high to be sustainable. Current leaders understand and agree that the school cannot reach a judgement of 'good' unless it is able, as a result of successful improvement work, and within the maximum two-year timescale, to withdraw from external assistance and show independent capacity for sustained success.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Raeside

Her Majesty's Inspector