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6 December 2013

Mrs Susan Cox and Mr Steve Owen  
Acting Headteachers  
Sutton Valence Primary School  
North Street  
Sutton Valence  
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Kent  
ME17 3HT

Dear Mrs Cox and Mr Owen

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Sutton Valence Primary School**

Following my visit to your school on 5 December 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 school should take further action to:

- sharpen the school improvement plan so it:
  - shows actions for the whole academic year to help the school maintain direction as leadership changes
  - indicates more precisely the role of governors, and how progress towards each action will be checked and evaluated
  
- strengthen the actions to accelerate achievement for pupils in Year 6.

## **Evidence**

During the visit, I met with the two interim headteachers, the deputy headteacher, the special educational needs co-ordinator, the subject leader for English, a governor and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school improvement plan and looked at evidence relating to pupil premium funding (additional government funding for pupils eligible for free school meals, children who are looked after and pupils with a parent or carer in the armed services) and the school's records of monitoring. I visited each class to see the school in action (although pupils in Reception and Year 6 were on a school visit).

## **Context**

Since the inspection in September the Year 3 teacher is on long term sick leave and the class is being covered by a supply teacher. The Reception teacher leaves on maternity leave at Christmas and a new temporary teacher will take the class from January 2014. A new headteacher has been appointed and will start in April 2014.

## **Main findings**

Although new to the school at the time of the inspection in September 2013 you quickly gained an accurate awareness of the considerable task to secure good achievement for all pupils. You have tackled the key areas with energy and the staff team appreciate the strong sense of purpose and direction which you have brought to the school. Everyone is working well together to move the school forward.

The school improvement plan focuses on the right overall areas with achievement and teaching a high priority. The timetable of events is logical and helps staff know exactly what will be done and when. However it does not show precisely who will check each action to see whether it is successful and how this will be evaluated. The role of governors is unclear. This makes it hard for governors to fulfil their strategic role effectively. Planned actions do not extend across the whole academic year, which will make it difficult for the incoming headteacher to maintain the momentum of positive change.

You quickly improved the use of information about pupils' progress to be more helpful to teachers. Assessment, particularly in writing, was not secure in the past. You have acted effectively to help teachers make accurate judgements and set a benchmark to check how well pupils are doing. Meetings to discuss pupils now rightly check on the progress of all pupils, not only those with learning difficulties. As a result, appropriate action is taken where needed to help pupils catch up. You are well aware that pupils in Year 6 have fallen further behind because too much teaching in the past was not good enough. You rightly intend to strengthen the level of support to these pupils to help them progress. Additional funding for disadvantaged pupils is targeted in the right way but it is too soon to see if this has been effective.

There are pockets of good teaching in the school and you are using these well to set an example to others. Your updated policy for teaching and learning provides a helpful model of good teaching and has raised expectations. You have wisely matched teachers in 'buddy' pairs so they can help each other. As a result teachers feel well supported and you are building stronger capacity within the team. However it is early days and your work with teachers needs to build consistent good practice across the school.

A good start has been made to develop the expertise of teaching assistants. You have increased their accountability and it is helpful that you have set them targets to support their work. You have rightly decided to use models of good practice within and outside of the school to show them what is expected of their role.

Writing has a far higher profile, and pupils have more opportunities to apply their phonics (the link between sounds and letters) skills in extended pieces. The literacy subject leader provides useful support for other staff in modelling how to teach writing effectively. You have refreshed the handwriting policy and pupils proudly write their name in the display book when they receive a 'pen licence', indicating the greater status of handwriting and presentation. Your monitoring indicates presentation is starting to improve.

You have set the expectation that pupils will read more frequently. The lunchtime book club for older boys is helping to engage them in reading, although it is too early to see the impact on standards. Improved information about phonics in reading record books helps parents track their child's progress.

The recent mathematics week promoted the subject in a fun and engaging way. Pupils enjoyed challenges such as working out the height of the giant, and were able to tackle work at different levels of difficulty. Teachers should build more on this in their day to day lessons.

You have started to develop the outside area for Reception children to include better defined areas for learning. You agree that further work remains to be done in ensuring the right level of challenge and intend to focus on this with the new class teacher in January.

You have rightly clarified the responsibilities of senior and middle level leaders. As a result leaders report that they feel empowered. Suitable training is helping them to fulfil their roles. Each member of the team knows exactly where to focus and what is expected. This is helping to drive improvements quickly.

Subject leaders for English and mathematics check carefully how well pupils are doing, for example by looking at books. They make helpful comments and will revisit to ensure recommendations have been followed and that teachers are improving.

Governors have a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. Link governors have been established to help focus governor monitoring. However, their specific role within the school development plan is not well enough defined and this is holding them back.

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**

The local authority is providing useful, well-judged support to improve teaching and learning. It is too early to see how effective this has been. There has been helpful training for middle level leaders and as a result they have greater confidence and are more accountable for their work.

Teachers at Sutton Valence are working well together to share and develop expertise within the school. You have usefully enlisted support from other schools where needed and I urge you to continue to build strong links with models of good practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Amanda Gard

**Her Majesty's Inspector**