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Mrs Alison Waite
Headteacher
Hilltop Junior School
Hill Avenue
Wickford
Essex
SS11 8LT

Dear Mrs Waite

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Hilltop Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 13 January 2014, 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.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, members of the senior leadership team and three members of the governing body. I spoke with a representative of the local authority and a school improvement adviser. The school improvement plan and other documents were evaluated. We jointly observed the quality of teaching in all year groups, with a particular focus on improvements since the last inspection. We spent longer in the three classes with Year 6 pupils. We also looked at the school's most recent achievement data. We discussed the school's monitoring of the quality of teaching and I looked at documents outlining how this information is used to inform decisions about staff pay.

Context

Since the inspection all vacancies on the governing body have been filled. No new members of staff have been appointed.

Main findings

You and the senior leadership team have played an important part in improving the quality of teaching and learning since the last inspection. More teaching is now good or outstanding. There are more frequent and rigorous observations of teaching with useful feedback for teachers on what is going well and what needs to be improved. Areas for improvement from earlier observations are a prominent feature of subsequent observations so that teachers know whether or not they are getting better. However, written feedback lacks a sufficiently sharp focus on pupils' progress so that the important link between what the teacher does and how much progress pupils make is too often absent. Marking has improved since the last inspection and is often good. Pupils know what the different coloured highlighting of their writing means and often respond promptly to suggested improvements. Marking is thorough and detailed. It tells pupils what they have done well and how to improve. Teachers do not always refer back to these suggestions for improvement in later marking so that pupils can be clear about whether or not they have been successful. Good marking can be seen in a range of subjects. The school has strengthened target setting for pupils with detailed targets now in place for pupils' writing. While initial targets have been set and new target sheets pasted into pupils' literacy books, progress against these is not being tracked carefully enough in all classes. Expectations have been raised so that all pupils are expected to make good progress. There are early indications that this, together with improved teaching, is beginning to raise standards.

Pupils are given greater opportunities to write at length and teachers are more effective in planning opportunities for pupils to write in a range of subjects. Achievement in reading and writing is beginning to improve. As a result of daily practice and raised expectations pupils now form and join letters more consistently. Handwriting for the youngest pupils is improving rapidly. Many older pupils take care with their presentation and demonstrate a real pride in how their work looks. Pupils now have more opportunities to apply their mathematical knowledge and skills to practical, investigative work, such as in their study of the school garden. The school makes good use of display boards in classrooms and shared areas to exemplify rising expectations in a range of subjects.

In lessons, teachers usually explain the work carefully so that pupils know exactly what is expected of them. Pupils listen carefully and are eager to learn. Where teaching is best, questioning is used well to challenge pupils and prompt them to think more deeply about their answers. Where this aspect of teaching is weaker, expectations are not high enough. Teachers do not ask sufficiently difficult questions

or follow-up questions. When answers are not explicit teachers sometimes rephrase the answer rather than challenging pupils to express themselves more clearly.

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 school is making good use of local authority support with a particular focus on leadership and management, the quality of teaching and on improving the consistency of assessment, provision and communication with Hilltop Infant School. The recent local authority review of the governing body concludes that governance is secure and improving. It recommends that governors improve their monitoring of how the quality of teaching is reflected in teachers' pay and their oversight of the school improvement plan. The school is also supported by a consultant adviser who is providing effective support to improve the quality of subject leadership, raise achievement and improve the quality of teaching.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Essex local authority and the DfE Academies Advisers Unit.

Yours sincerely

Robert Lovett
Her Majesty's Inspector