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7 February 2014

Marianne Fuller
The Downs Primary School and Nursery
The Hides
Harlow
CM20 3RB

Dear Mrs Fuller

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Downs Primary School and Nursery

Following my visit to your school on 6 February 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings. 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 October 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:

- use a range of monitoring evidence, including lesson observations, evaluations of progress in pupils' books and achievement data to form a judgement about the quality of teaching overtime in each class
- ensure there are robust plans to improve teaching that is less than consistently good, including clear targets, training for improvement and tight deadlines
- consider new ways to use expertise within the school to drive improvements in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and other leaders. We toured the classrooms together. I met with members of the governing body and a representative from the

local authority. I held a telephone meeting with an external consultant. I looked at documents including the school's improvement plans, achievement data and records of your monitoring activities.

Main findings

The experienced and skilled interim headteacher is making a difference and driving improvements with vigour. The school improvement plan is a detailed document. It addresses all of the areas for improvement from the section 5 inspection. It helpfully includes key questions for governors to ask, so that they can check the school's progress. There are clear and measureable measures of impact, broken down into milestones targets. The headteacher evaluates all of the school's improvement work for its impact.

Leaders provide support and training to improve teaching including that provided by the local authority, but there are no clear improvement plans to improve teaching that is not yet good. A range of monitoring activities including lesson observations, work scrutiny and analysis of progress take place but these are not yet combined to give an accurate view of teaching over time. The headteacher makes accurate and insightful evaluations of teaching and learning and identifies appropriate targets for improvement following lesson observations.

Leaders have conducted a book scrutiny to assess the effectiveness of the school's approach to teaching writing. As a result, leaders have amended the school's practice and provision. The leaders for mathematics works with staff to improve their teaching. Pupils' progress and attainment is checked more regularly in Key Stage 1 and 2. Leaders identify pupils who are stuck or have fallen behind and teachers are held to account for their progress.

Early Years Foundation Stage staff have introduced 'learning challenges' to give more focus to activities. However, more needs to be done to ensure that teachers plan for children's individual needs and challenge them well. The school employs a teacher with particular expertise in early learning but insufficient time is yet given to support Early Years Foundation Stage improvement. Staff track the progress of children in Reception classes and have implemented a new system to do this. More needs to be done, however, to compare outcomes between groups.

The behaviour policy has been adapted to include rewards to encourage pupils to walk sensibly around the school and this is having a positive impact on behaviour.

Teachers' assessments of writing are checked and compared to ensure that they are more accurate. Marking has improved and twenty-five minutes of each day are devoted to giving pupils opportunities to respond to marking and for teachers to pick up quickly on any misconceptions.

Members of the governing body are linked with each of the school's priorities for improvement and are clear about their role in monitoring the work of the school. Governors conduct learning walks to see for themselves the improvements the school is making.

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 uses the services of an independent consultant to help raise the quality of teaching and to support leadership in action planning for improvement. The local authority has recently begun working more closely with the school. The local authority has provided training to improve teaching and middle leadership. A local authority representative visits the school regularly now, to monitor progress and support leadership, including by conducting joint lesson observations.

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

Yours sincerely

Michelle Winter
Her Majesty's Inspector