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Mrs Bernie Doherty
Headteacher
St Leonard's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School
Tunstall Village Road
Silksworth
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
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Dear Mrs Doherty

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Leonard's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided Primary School, Sunderland

Following my visit to your school on 14 February 2014, 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 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:

- ensure new subject and other leaders develop their leadership skills, including by carrying out lesson observations, so that they can better hold staff to account for the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement.

Evidence

During my visit, I held meetings with you, the deputy headteacher, subject and other leaders, a group of pupils, members of the governing body 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 a range of evidence including minutes of governing body meetings, the outcomes of monitoring activities, information on pupils' progress, teachers' planning files and samples of pupils' work. You accompanied me on a tour of the school, including observing provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Context

Since the inspection in October 2013, following a term with no substantive deputy headteacher, a newly-appointed deputy headteacher took up her post on 6 January 2014. One teacher is absent on maternity leave and two teachers are on long term sickness absence. Three supply teachers, including two newly-qualified teachers, are covering these absences. Subject and other leaders are new to their roles, with the mathematics leader covering an absence on a temporary basis.

Main findings

You, senior leaders and governors have taken prompt action to tackle the areas for improvement identified in the recent inspection. There is now a sharper focus on improving pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching. The new school improvement plan contains measurable targets and clear milestones so that the school's progress towards becoming 'good' can be tracked and evaluated. The impact of the actions identified in the plan is beginning to be seen.

- You and senior leaders are holding teachers more fully to account for the progress pupils make by checking more rigorously to ensure pupils are on track to reach their targets. Staff are now able to extract important information from the tracking system about the attainment and progress of individual pupils and they are beginning to use this to set more challenging work for pupils.
- Evidence in teachers' planning files show they are also beginning to use this assessment information more effectively to intervene quickly should pupils fall behind, particularly those who need more support with learning phonetic sounds (letters and the sounds they represent).
- Pupils' books show that the quality of marking and feedback is improving and there are now more opportunities for pupils to respond to marking. Pupils who spoke to me during my visit showed that they now have a clearer understanding of how to improve their work.
- There is evidence in pupils' books to show that they have increased opportunities to practise their handwriting skills. There are also greater opportunities for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage to engage in mark-making and writing in their play; for example, children drew up plans and designs for their own spaceships before they set about constructing them with large apparatus in the outdoor area.

You are making appropriate use of external support including that from local authority consultants, other schools and the teaching alliance to help improve the quality of teaching and the skills of new leaders. Leaders are now becoming more involved in scrutinising pupils' work and evaluating teachers' planning but have had very few opportunities to carry out lesson observations in order to check whether actions to bring about improvements are having an impact on teachers' practice.

Governors are confidently holding leaders to account and challenging the school to improve. They know the school well and are able to form an independent view of how well pupils are learning because they visit regularly and know how to interpret and challenge the schools' data on pupils' progress.

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 already had a programme of support in place for the school prior to the inspection. This is continuing, but now has greater rigour. The School Support and Intervention Officer from the local authority has brokered support from the St John Bosco Roman Catholic Primary School Teaching Alliance which is helping staff to improve the quality of teaching. The school is also benefiting from working within a cluster of local schools to share good practice. A local authority review and scrutiny of pupils' work was carried out jointly with school leaders on 22 and 24 January 2014 and very specific feedback has been provided to each teacher to help them improve their teaching. The early evidence of impact can be seen for example, in the improvements in marking and feedback in pupils' books. Early Years Foundation Stage, Literacy and Numeracy consultants from the local authority have provided bespoke training to help new leaders develop their leadership skills. As a result, leaders have produced suitable targeted 'raising achievement plans' and have scrutinised pupils' work and teachers' planning to help improve the quality of teaching.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Sunderland local authority and the Director of the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle.

Yours sincerely

Christine Inkster

Her Majesty's Inspector