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Mrs Moira Maughan
Headteacher
St James' CofE Junior School
Wellington Row
Whitehaven
Cumbria
CA28 7HG

Dear Mrs Maughan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St James' CofE Junior School, Cumbria

Following my visit to your school on 28 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 January 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- sharpen the school's evaluation of how well it is doing so that senior leaders and governors are clear about the school's strengths and areas for development
- refine the post-Ofsted action plan so that is clear which of the priorities are the most pressing and should be tackled first. Check that staff responsible for making sure that actions are taken and those who are responsible for monitoring and evaluating the impact of those actions are identified. Ensure that the plan contains suitable milestones so that senior leaders and governors are able to monitor and check the progress being made against each of the priorities
- make sure that analyses of records of incidents are evaluated so that senior leaders can act on the findings and make appropriate improvements
- bring all marking in the school up to the standard of the best, so that pupils know what they have done well, what they need to do to improve and then act on their teachers' advice
- make sure that the review of governance is completed and appropriate action taken on the findings.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the Chair of the Governing Body, two representatives of the local authority and two teachers who have leadership responsibility for English and mathematics. All these meetings were held to discuss the actions being taken by the school to address the areas for improvement identified in the most recent inspection report. I also met with a group of charming and articulate Year 6 pupils who willingly shared with me their opinions about the school. I evaluated the school's analysis of how well it is doing, the school development plan, the post-Ofsted action plan and the school's most recent analysis of the information it has collected about incidents related to health and safety. I scrutinised the work in a sample of books from pupils in Year 3 and Year 6 in order to evaluate the standard of marking. I also made a number of short visits to lessons.

Context

With the support of the local authority the governing body are currently recruiting for a suitably qualified and experienced teacher to fill a vacancy on the senior leadership team.

Main findings

Since the inspection you and your colleagues have taken action to address a number of the areas for improvement described in the report. For example two teachers from lower Key Stage 2 have visited colleagues in a local successful school to observe good classroom practice. Advisers from the local authority have worked with subject leaders to develop their skills in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning when they observe lessons. However, a number of these strategies are not firmly established and as a consequence they have yet to have sufficient impact.

Senior leaders' self-evaluation of how well the school is doing is broadly accurate. Their judgements on pupil's achievement, the standard of teaching, pupils' behaviour and safety, and the quality of leadership are in line with the findings of inspectors. However, the reasons why the school requires improvement in each of these areas has not been made clear and as a result leaders and managers have not identified precisely enough what it is that needs to be done to move the school forward rapidly on its journey of improvement.

You and your colleagues have produced a post Ofsted action plan, specifically to address the improvements identified by the inspection team. The plan is structured so that each of the areas for development is accompanied by a set of actions which, if successful will enable you to improve the school. However, the development areas are not in an order of priority and so it is not clear which are the most important. It is not always clear who is responsible for each of the actions in the plan or who is responsible for monitoring and evaluating how effective they are. Some of the milestones in the plan against which governors can monitor the progress that is being made against each of the improvement priorities are not sharp enough. Consequently this lack of clarity is slowing the school's progress on its journey of improvement.

Senior leaders have carried out a detailed analysis of the records of incidents relating to behaviour and safety. However, they have yet to analyse this information and extract from it the key messages in order to make the necessary improvements.

Pupils' books are marked regularly and teachers are complying with the school's marking policy. Teachers use praise liberally, affirming pupils and boosting their confidence. Where marking is most effective however, teachers inform pupils about what they have done well and what they need to do to make their work even better. Pupils then act on this feedback making corrections as appropriate. However, some teachers' marking is not as incisive as this; consequently opportunities are missed for pupils to learn from their mistakes. There are also examples where teachers have given pupils advice about how to improve a piece of work and pupils have not acted on it.

Prior to the inspection governors relied too heavily on senior leaders to inform them about how well the school was doing and consequently had an inflated view of the overall effectiveness of the school. They now have a much more accurate picture of the school's strengths and areas for development and have been given independent access to information about the school's performance. This is enabling them to provide greater challenge to senior leaders and hold them to account for the standards achieved by the pupils. However, the review of governance, recommended at the time of the previous inspection, has yet to be completed and this is impacting on plans to develop the governing body in order to further increase its effectiveness.

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 has taken timely action to support the school since the inspection. For example they have brokered links with three neighbouring successful schools. These links are helping you and your colleagues learn about effective practice in the teaching of literacy and numeracy. These links are also enabling the school's leaders and managers to access help, support and advice as they work to improve the school. Local authority advisers have worked with subject leaders to hone their skills in observing the quality of teaching and learning and provide objective feedback to those teachers whose classroom practice has been monitored. An adviser from the local authority is undertaking a review of governance and has identified appropriate training for governors with the aim of increasing their effectiveness.

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

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector