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5 March 2014

Mr Paul Davenport  
Headteacher  
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Birkenhead  
Woodchurch Road  
Prenton  
Merseyside  
CH43 5UT

Dear Mr Davenport

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, Birkenhead, Wirral**

Following my visit to your school on 4 March 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 taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- refine further the post-inspection action plan so that it includes more measurable criteria and timescales so that progress can be more easily and regularly assessed
- improve the learning environment by reducing clutter in classrooms and refreshing all displays around the school so that they stimulate pupils' imagination and support their learning.

### **Evidence**

During the visit, meetings were held with you, pupils, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. I also dropped into a number of lessons, looked at samples of written work and scrutinised current information on pupils' progress.

### **Context**

Since the previous inspection the school has advertised for a deputy headteacher and proposals are afoot to re-structure the leadership team when this post is filled.

School leaders, including governors, freely acknowledge that the inspection judgement came as a timely 'wake up' call: it has nudged them out of a degree of complacency that had become established because the school had lost sight of improvements in standards at a national level. Despite your short time in the post of headteacher, you have quickly identified the key obstacles standing in the way of this school getting better. The inspection report confirmed your evaluation of the school's weaknesses and has served as a further spur to improvement.

The action plan that you have worked on, since the inspection, is focused on the correct priorities but is still too vague, with not enough measurable criteria by which progress in improvement might be assessed. On the other hand, the supplementary plan to improve English, particularly writing, is very much fit for purpose. Governors have set up a committee to check the progress the school is making against the action plan. They feel they are now much more 'hands on', for example, by requesting reports from school leaders on work scrutiny.

Since the inspection, school leaders, including governors, have undertaken a review of performance management arrangements. As a result, all staff have measurable targets for pupils' progress by which their performance can be judged. School leaders now check up on the quality of teaching through a range of evidence that better shows how good teaching is over time; they study pupils' work and information on rates of progress, not just basing the judgement on a snapshot of a short time spent in a lesson.

The marking policy has been rewritten and work scrutiny and lesson observations are more focused and frequent. As a result, school leaders have a much clearer idea of how well pupils are doing and teachers are teaching. Pupils now have targets in their books to help them improve their writing and the pupils I spoke to said they find this really helpful. Information on the rates of pupils' progress, examined during the visit, shows an improving trend on this time last year.

This visit took place only a short time since the inspection and it was evident that the more rigorous procedures to check up on the quality of teaching, although helping to steer the school in the right direction, have not had time to make enough difference. There are still inconsistencies in practice across the school; for example, in mathematics, the level of challenge for more able pupils varies considerably across year groups and is dependent basically on who the class teacher is. School leaders are hopeful that, as teachers get used to the new procedures, inconsistencies will be ironed out and the quality of teaching across the school will rapidly improve.

Since the previous inspection, school leaders have identified some weaknesses in assessment. In order to sort this out, you have introduced more frequent moderation of work and teachers visited a local school to get a second opinion on the accuracy of their marking. This feedback has proved very beneficial and staff are increasingly confident that their judgements are accurate. Some staff have had additional training on understanding information on pupils' progress so that they can spot underachievement more quickly and then do something about it so that pupils do not fall too far behind.

You have introduced a number of initiatives to improve pupils' writing. The new two-week cycle that links reading to writing is effective in harnessing pupils' excellent reading skills to stimulate the imagination and improve their writing. You explained during the visit that you felt previously teachers had been very 'worksheet-dependent' and as a result there was insufficient evidence in pupils' books to show the progress they were, or, indeed, were not, making. Work lacked continuity and developments in writing were too fragmented. Now pupils have much more work in their books to show for their efforts; they beamed with pleasure when I invited them to read out to me work they were proud of. This work was excellent; furthermore pupils could explain with confidence, precision and maturity why such writing was of good quality.

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 has welcomed the enhanced support provided by the local authority. A representative of the local authority has spoken to all staff to raise awareness of what the school needs to do to improve quickly. Termly meetings have been established to hold the school to account and the local authority is committed to visiting the school regularly to check that actions taken are having the desired impact.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Bonenfant

**Her Majesty's Inspector**