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Mrs L Lopez
Acting Headteacher
Stonehill School
Western Close
Letchworth Garden City
SG6 4SZ

Dear Mrs Lopez

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Stonehill School

Following my visit to your school on 17 March 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 following the section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- give pupils' work in mathematics, including mathematics in the context of different subjects, a higher profile around the school
- use your analysis of pupil progress data to focus improvement planning, monitoring and evaluation on different pupil groups
- build on the good practice of your 'fabulous writing files' across all subjects, to promote the refinement of pupils' subject skills
- give further consideration to the development of the learning environment in Reception, in particular a covered area outdoors
- make full use of Ofsted's resources and publications.

Evidence

During the visit, I held meetings with you, the subject leaders for mathematics and English, three governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, and a representative of the local authority. I evaluated the school action plan, reviewed monitoring records, and visited classes to see pupils and staff at work.

Context

There have been no changes to staffing since the inspection. A substantive headteacher has been appointed, starting in the summer term. One governor has left and two new ones have joined the governing body.

Main findings

Since the previous inspection, you have:

- written a school action plan, supplemented by specific improvement plans for example, English, mathematics and the Early Years Foundation Stage
- provided a range of professional development for staff, linked to the key issues for improvement
- widened the range of monitoring activities, in order to evaluate the impact of professional development on pupils' learning and achievement
- increased levels of accountability at all levels, through more regular reviews of pupils' progress, linked to performance management
- developed the roles of governors in relation to specific priorities, in order to track improvement, challenge underachievement and target support.

You are evaluating your action plan regularly in order to check the school's progress in reaching the targets you have set. You have not extended the plan beyond this school year in order that the new headteacher's vision is embraced. However, you have supplemented the action plan with a 'getting to good' programme designed to help all teachers 'graduate' to teaching that is good or better. The range of evidence used to judge teaching is now wider and includes analysis of pupil's progress data, work scrutiny, lesson observations and focused learning walks. Not all pupil groups are clearly identified in the way that the progress of pupils on free school meals are.

Staff are using the professional development provided to improve pupils' learning. For example, more open-ended activities and better questioning are beginning to increase the level of challenge in lessons. Teachers are reflecting on their own teaching and that of their 'lesson study group' in order to increase their impact on pupils' achievement. This is starting to raise their expectation of pupils. For example, more pupils capable of Level 6 work have been identified since the inspection.

Work with the local authority to ensure that assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage is accurate is providing a more secure basis for progress tracking. However, work to enhance the learning environment for children in the nursery and reception is mostly at the planning stage. Although children have access to a wide range of resources inside and outside the lack of a covered area outside in particular restricts the flow of activities.

Senior leaders have settled into their roles since the inspection. Visits to classrooms shows that the literacy and mathematics leaders are using their own practice to set a good example. In particular, pupils' reading and writing is clearly a high priority

across the school. The 'fabulous writing files' that contain good examples of pupils' writing for a range of purposes show that pupils are able to reach higher standards when they are expected to revisit and refine their skills. Postcards illustrated and written by pupils when on their travels, posted back to school, stimulate interest as soon as visitors enter the school. There is much less evidence of mathematics, including work in the context of other subjects.

Governors are very well informed about the school's priorities and progress because they make and take opportunities to find out for themselves. These monitoring activities help to check headteacher's reports about the impact of new initiatives. However, further use could be made of Ofsted's resources and publications about good practice to inform the questions asked by the governing body, for example of different subject leaders.

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's support strategy is sharply focused. For example, teaching and learning advisers in mathematics are helping to inform and embed the work of senior and middle leaders. Regular evaluation of their impact by the local authority is helping to adjust the support provided, in order to increase the impact. A timely programme of monitoring by an officer independent of the support programme is scheduled to review the school's progress overall. Links with other schools brokered by the local authority include mentoring for the acting headteacher and a programme of visits to an outstanding school for all staff.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector