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14 March 2014

Mrs C Mason
Acting headteacher
Holy Spirit Catholic Primary School
Brunswick Street
Parr
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 2JE

Dear Mrs Mason

Special measures monitoring inspection of Holy Spirit Catholic Primary School

Following my visit with Vanessa MacDonald, Additional Inspector, to your school on 12 and 13 March 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children and Young People's Services for St Helens.

Yours sincerely

Eileen Mulgrew

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in September 2013.

- Improve teaching, so that all pupils make consistently rapid progress and achieve standards that are at least in line with those expected for their age, particularly in mathematics and reading, by ensuring that:
 - all teachers have high expectations of pupils of all abilities, especially boys, and provide them with challenging work
 - lessons capture the interest of every pupil, so that each one of them learns well and makes good progress
 - the assessments made of pupils' achievement and progress are accurate and are used to plan lessons that extend what pupils already know, understand and can do
 - marking gives pupils clear and regular advice on what they need to do to get better.

- Bring about immediate improvements in leadership and management by:
 - changing the responsibilities of leaders to match the current needs of the school and making sure that they all have a clear role in improving teaching
 - ensuring that leaders at every level in the school have the highest aspirations for pupils and bring about the rapid changes and improvements that are urgently needed.

- Carry out an external review of governance and ensure that every governor has the skills and training to hold the school more rigorously to account.

- Improve the behaviour and safety of pupils by:
 - making lessons interesting, so that every pupil keeps concentrating and working hard
 - recording all incidents of misbehaviour and bullying and analysing the information to identify and help any pupils who are repeatedly misbehaving or being bullied
 - producing a new behaviour policy that takes full account of all forms of bullying and providing staff with training in how to identify and deal with these.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 12 and 13 March 2014.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work including watching six teachers teach full lessons; looking at the teaching, learning, pupils' books, assessment information; and talking to a group of pupils outside of the classroom for about ten minutes. Three shorter visits to lessons were also made. We met with you, as acting headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body, a local authority officer, three subject leaders, a group of twelve pupils and heard several pupils read. Over the course of the two days we talked with about 40 other pupils. We scrutinised documents including new policies, pupils' progress information, records of behaviour logs, the school improvement plan and your records of monitoring the quality of teaching.

Context

You, as acting headteacher, lead the school full time, which is a change since my visit in December 2013. On the days of the inspection three teachers were absent; one on maternity leave and two others, including the deputy headteacher, on sickness absence.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Information collected by senior leaders on pupils' achievement is showing variable progress for pupils in reading, writing and mathematics. Past information about pupils' attainment and progress was found to be unreliable so an accurate picture of pupils' learning over time is not yet available. Action has been taken to secure a clear representation of the attainment level pupils are now working at and so provide a baseline from which progress can be measured. This information shows that there are some gaps in attainment between different groups of pupils. Despite this, through a variety of checking methods the acting headteacher is building up information about pupils' progress.

Through our observations, discussion with pupils about their work and a scrutiny of pupils' workbooks, we found that pupils are learning better and making progress in their work. This is shown in the improved quality and greater amount of work pupils cover in their books, their own judgement of their progress and through the pupils' positive attitudes to learning. Pupils want to learn and say that their teachers explain well, so they understand what is expected of them; they have the resources and aids to learning they need and can ask for, and receive, support. This was observed clearly in a Year 6 lesson on writing; after reading an excerpt from 'The Wind in the Willows', pupils quickly settled to checking their understanding of brackets, using jotters 'to have a go' before the teacher introduced new learning on using punctuation. Once pupils were working independently, adults moved around the room to help and challenge. As a result, over this time pupils made swift progress in

understanding the reason for using punctuation and felt ready to use it in their writing.

Pupils enjoy the variety of subjects they learn and comment that there are more visits linked with topic work. Two pupils who escorted me around the school commented on how each class knows what other classes are doing and can help each other, for example, a Year 6 pupil lending Year 3 a picture on Egyptians.

The quality of teaching

Teachers appreciate the acting headteacher's clarity of direction for the improvement of the school. They thrive on the training activities which are helping them to provide better learning experiences for their pupils. Well-linked training from local authority consultants, the partner school and other external bodies for all staff and individual staff has supported them in improving elements of their practice. Guidance on teaching writing, phonics (the sounds that letters make) and mathematics has led to new approaches which teachers are applying in their classes. Training on behaviour management approaches means that staff use the new guidelines more consistently and are better equipped to deal with any issues which may arise. Meetings have been held to check the attainment levels teachers were giving to pupils' writing so that they could gain confidence in what is needed to award a particular level. Consequently, teachers are more regularly asking other teachers their views on judging the attainment of a piece of pupil's work in writing and mathematics. This is leading to a better understanding of the level that pupils are reaching, so that activities can be pitched correctly for all groups of pupils. However, the lack of security in pupils' past progress information leads to activities being planned that do not always challenge middle-ability and more-able pupils, so that progress over a lesson is limited. Pupils talk about their targets and older ones are familiar with the National Curriculum levels at which they are working. However, the levels are often too wide, with many targets, so that pupils are not clear what they have to do to improve their work and progress to the next stage.

A new marking and presentation policy is guiding teachers in assessing pupils' written work. Marking is frequent and the new policy is being used to show pupils what they have done and what to do next; however, it is too early to judge whether this method will help pupils to progress quickly. Some teachers give pupils time to respond to the marking and this is allowing pupils to improve the next piece of work. But this is not common practice across the school.

Vibrant classrooms reflect teachers' improved motivation in setting high expectations and supporting pupils to do their best. Well-planned learning is resulting in a busy atmosphere in most classes as pupils make the most of prepared resources, such as 'working walls', jotters and mathematical equipment, which enable them to work on their own or in groups to succeed. It would be worthwhile looking at providing 'word banks' or word books for younger pupils to have a try at spelling words rather than

relying on adults to tell them. Features of strong teaching include: good subject knowledge so that pupils are asked questions which make them think and explain that thinking; an emphasis on the correct use of language when speaking; clear modelling of what pupils are expected to do; and adults moving around the room to check on pupils' understanding and support or challenge further learning. Teachers effectively use teaching assistants to support and guide individuals or groups of pupils to improve their learning. This is due to active communication between the adults in the class.

While many of the above positive aspects were observed in many lessons, and pupils' learning is improving in these classes, these approaches are not evident in all classes and some unevenness remains across the school.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils have pride in their school and wear their uniforms smartly. Comments, such as 'this is a lovely school with lovely teachers', 'I know what I need to do because my teacher explains it to me' and 'I am making good progress', all reflect their confidence in adults who look after them and value their views. Members of the school council were involved in the creation of the new behaviour policy which is used by most teachers. Pupils know exactly the steps taken to ensure good behaviour; they know that if behaviour becomes serious they and their parents will be asked if 'Holy Spirit is the right school for them'. Pupils comment on the acting headteacher's firm, but fair approach to dealing with incidents and appreciate her interest in them and her sense of humour. Areas of the school have been 'de-cluttered' and the school is a neat, tidy, well-organised and welcoming place. We observed very orderly behaviour around the school, in the hall and out on the playground. In classes pupils generally concentrate and persevere with their work; they allow each other to talk and listen to their teachers. On a few occasions behaviour interrupts learning as pupils wait to be told what to do or are unsure about what to do next.

Pupils feel safe and consider that all types of bullying are dealt with quickly. Records of incidents reflect this view and they show a decreasing number of incidents. Pupils talk about how they, and their families, have been supported during troubled times. Regardless of this more positive reflection of behaviour, not all pupils were confident that incidents of, for example, name-calling would not happen again.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Enthusiasm and determination sum up the acting headteacher's approach to the improvement of Holy Spirit. Using an accurate evaluation of the school's work she has set a clear direction for all to plot the progress of the school. Action plans reflect the central need to improve the quality of teaching and are linked to better outcomes for pupils. Through regular checking of the quality of teaching and pupils'

learning she has identified where training is needed, including for weaker practice, and is providing high quality support. Links with the partner school have resulted in teachers from each age group from both schools meeting together to share ideas and teachers from Holy Spirit are using those techniques in their classrooms. Training provided from the partnership school on the teaching of writing and reading has increased teachers' confidence and skills in teaching these subjects. Training on place value and progression of calculation means that staff have a better understanding of how to build on pupils' knowledge as they move through the school.

The Early Years Foundation Stage area has been reorganised so that children from Nursery and Reception can use all the learning experiences planned. However, leaders know that there is still some work to be done to provide resources for pupils to work on their own; so that this learning matches the learning children receive when working with a teacher.

Middle leaders are enthusiastic about wanting to contribute to the improvement of the school. Through coaching from the headteacher on, for example, the use of pupil progress information, they are gaining confidence in how to carry out their role and be more accountable. Several have completed activities to check on planning and marking, reporting to governors and liaising with parents to inform them of developments. Subject leaders have plans to check on the quality of practice within their subject as they enhance their skills through research of the new 2014 National Curriculum.

Governors lost no time in conducting a review of their work. Swiftly they secured a National Lead of Governance to work with them, fill any vacant positions and carry out a skills audit. After collecting this information the Chair of the Governing Body has reviewed the organisation of committees, so that members with the relevant skills sit on the right committees. Members' knowledge of the school is growing as they are linked with subject leaders and an individual class and make visits to see what is happening in the school. An action plan is guiding their development alongside the progress of the school. A small group of governors meets once a month to check on the progress of the school and minutes show governors are asking more searching questions of the acting headteacher, with a focus on the progress of pupils.

External support

The local authority, diocese and partnership school have worked together to provide training for staff, and support and challenge for Holy Spirit to improve. An officer from the local authority is a member of the small group of governors who meet monthly and so provides a layer of accountability. Plans of the local authority to hold a termly review at director level and require the acting headteacher and Chair of the

Governing Body to attend are at an early stage of development, but will provide an extra layer of accountability to enable the school to improve swiftly.