

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 123 1231

Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566 937

Direct F 01695 729 320

Direct email: jsimmons@cfbt.com



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Ms Helen Smith
Headteacher
Newton-le-Willows Primary School
Sanderling Road
Newton-le-Willows
Merseyside
WA12 9UF

Dear Ms Smith

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Newton-le-Willows Primary School, St. Helens

Following my visit to your school on 20 March 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on 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 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:

- further strengthen its draft school development plan to ensure that all actions have readily measurable targets which focus more sharply on those groups of pupils and individuals who have underachieved. This includes the most able pupils and those who are supported by the pupil premium (additional funding allocated for students known to be eligible for free school meals, looked after by the local authority, or members of service families)
- ensure teachers and teaching assistants have enough opportunities to share across key stages and curriculum areas the good practice already present in the school

- ensure that all teachers consistently:
 - give clear and precise feedback to pupils on how to improve their work
 - check regularly that their guidance is followed up by a further challenge and
 - encourage pupils to respond to such guidance

- intensify leadership training and support for middle leaders so that they are as effective as they can be in holding underperforming teachers to account

- continue to work with the local authority to ensure the school improves and provides a good education for all its pupils before the next full inspection in around 18 months' time.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, the Chair and representatives of the Governing Body and of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school's draft school development plan was evaluated. A range of documentation was scrutinised, for example the school's records related to checking the quality of teaching, pupils' achievement and performance management. In addition, a small sample of pupils' written work was seen. A brief visit was made to most classes to check on the quality of teaching, learning and behaviour.

Context

In recent years the school has undergone significant turbulence in staffing and senior leadership. You were appointed as interim headteacher in October 2013 and a new substantive headteacher will take up her permanent post after the Easter holiday. Since the last inspection the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body have resigned and been replaced. Two other new governors have been appointed by the local authority, to build the Governing Body's capacity to challenge the school effectively.

Main findings

In the few weeks since the last inspection, that judged the school to require improvement, you and your senior leaders have worked tirelessly and with considerable success to maintain staff morale and goodwill. This has begun to galvanise them to tackle the recommendations for improvement. For example the new reward system you have put in place for good attendance has improved it significantly this year. Exclusions have reduced.

The school has not previously had a culture of planning its actions for improvement at whole school level, but rather at subject or phase level. You and the senior leaders have now begun to establish a more cohesive school development plan that has the capacity to drive the school's improvement faster, by bringing all the separate elements of the school's work together in one document.

The draft development plan is fit for purpose, being well focused on the impact of proposed actions to raise pupils' achievement. However the final document will need to ensure that the impact of planning on all key groups of pupils, for example, those supported by the pupil premium and the most able, are visible throughout the document. It will be particularly important to show how these pupils will reach the levels of progress of which they are capable and that targets for their improved progress are precisely quantified, in order to drive improvement at an appropriate pace up to the next Section 5 inspection.

More rigorous systems for checking on the quality of teaching, of pupils' progress and for performance management are in place. The school has already taken some robust steps to improve teaching further by providing teachers and teaching assistants with more opportunities for continuing professional development. This will be especially important in growing the school's capacity at middle leadership level to challenge underperformance with confidence.

Marking is diligent and regular. It clearly sets out the next steps in pupils' learning. There remains some inconsistency in the quality of marking between subjects. Some feedback is not precise and challenging enough and there is not yet a real dialogue between teachers and pupils about their learning.

Feedback to teachers on the quality of their teaching is generally clear and helpfully linked to the Teachers' Standards. It would be useful if such feedback routinely prescribed appropriate continuing professional development in order for teachers to meet their performance targets.

There has been some training through the local authority (LA) for the improvement of teaching. The LA has also provided consultancy to raise standards in mathematics and literacy. Membership of a local network of schools has benefited the school as a source of training for teachers in mathematics and through subject leader meetings. Further networks are supporting Early Years and the improvement of the school's administration systems. It is too soon to assess the impact of these measures.

The newly appointed chair and vice chair of the governing body and other governors whom I met during my visit are open and honest. They know the school's strengths and weaknesses well and are committed to the school's improvement. They are determined to play a very active role in ensuring that the school becomes good as quickly as possible. The Governing Body is now better placed to use information on the school's performance more independently, in order to hold it to account.

However, they know that they need to improve their practice further, for example in being able to challenge the school effectively in relation to pupil premium expenditure. Governors have therefore undertaken an audit of their skills, to ensure that all governors occupy roles in which they can make best use of their considerable expertise. Governors are to commission an external review of their practice in consultation with the new headteacher after Easter 2014.

The school has made a positive start on its journey to becoming good. However, time is needed before the impact on pupils' achievement of some of the robust new systems you have put in place can fully be seen.

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 LA knows the school's strengths and weaknesses well. They have been quick to provide intensive, well - structured support and training to challenge the school to improve further. In addition to providing training in mathematics and literacy, the LA has committed strong support for the induction of the new headteacher and to hold the school to account, by conducting termly reviews of the school's progress against the recommendations from the last inspection. In particular the LA recognises the need to work alongside middle leaders to build up their leadership skills and thus the school's capacity to sustain its own improvement over time.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for St Helens and as below.

Yours sincerely

Susan Wareing

Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter should be copied to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority – including where the school is an academy