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Mrs Sue Picknett  
Headteacher  
Thorntree Primary School  
The Greenway  
Middlesbrough  
North Yorkshire  
TS3 9NH

Dear Mrs Picknett

### **Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thorntree Primary School, Middlesbrough**

Following my visit to your school on 28 April 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 February 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:

- ensure that monitoring of new initiatives, including those conducted by governors, maintains a constant focus on the progress made by different groups of pupils
- build on the work already started to develop phonics so that pupils' wider reading and writing can be addressed in tandem.

### **Evidence**

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school action plan, the checks made on the quality of teaching and recent information about pupils' progress. You also accompanied me on a learning walk to observe the teaching of phonics.

## **Context**

One teacher has recently been designated a Specialist Leader of Education for work in Information and Communications Technology. Two senior leaders have been recruited for September to lead on mathematics and the implementation of the new curriculum. The prolonged refurbishment of the school is due for completion in July 2014. A consultation is currently underway regarding the formation of a cooperative trust among a number of local schools.

## **Main findings**

While disappointed by the outcome of the February inspection, you have used it as an opportunity to reinvigorate staff and provide a new sense of purpose and direction to your improvement work. Vacancies in the senior leadership team and significant building work over recent months have contributed to the current position of the school, but you have not allowed these circumstances to be used as excuses. Instead, you have focused your efforts on reviewing current practice so that inconsistencies in teaching, especially between subjects, can be addressed quickly.

Improved systems for checking on the quality of teaching are allowing you to hold teachers more robustly to account. Importantly, you recognise that it is the typical quality of teaching, day-to-day, that is of most importance rather than the performance of staff in a one-off, planned lesson observation. Work in pupils' books, the quality of teachers' planning and the progress pupils' make are now all being cross-referenced to give a more accurate view of teaching over time. It is imperative that these monitoring activities all keep a constant focus on the progress made by different groups of pupils, for example those who are most able, if attainment is to catch-up and keep-up with what similar pupils achieve nationally.

Pupils are responding well to the approach to phonics that was initiated before the February inspection; many are mastering new skills quickly with new found confidence to tackle unfamiliar words. Pupils' comprehension and writing are not as well developed. As we discussed, opportunities to address wider reading skills and the interrelated links between phonics, spelling and pupils' vocabulary must be exploited more fully for pupils to become well-rounded readers and writers.

Governance is becoming sharper-edged. Training on data analysis has allowed governors to ask more pertinent questions of senior leaders and offer more direct challenge around the progress pupils make. Year group links have enabled governors to corroborate what they are being told through their own first-hand checks. A greater emphasis on the progress and experiences of different groups of pupils during these visits would allow governors to determine whether gaps in achievement are closing as rapidly as they would expect.

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 begun to offer support as a result of the inspection outcome. A link officer has acted as a sounding-board for your action plans and is set to act as a 'critical friend' over the coming terms, providing a fresh perspective on how well new initiatives are making a difference. This is complemented well by your own commissioning of an external consultant to provide specialist support for reading.

Links with an outstanding school in a neighbouring authority, the support of the Middlesbrough Schools Teaching Alliance and the local support offered through a cluster of schools have all contributed to opportunities for staff to observe best practice. This has been particularly beneficial in beginning to raise the quality of teaching in English.

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

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

**Her Majesty's Inspector**