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Mrs Verna Marsh
Headteacher
St James CofE Primary School, Ashton-under-Lyne
Romney Street
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Lancashire
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Dear Mrs Marsh

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St James CofE Primary School, Ashton-under-Lyne, Tameside

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 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in September 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 identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- have the school's data for pupils' attainment and progress in mathematics and reading externally validated in order to ensure its reliability
- continue to improve the quality of classroom practice so that all teaching in the school is brought up to the standard of the best
- revise senior leader's evaluation of how well the school is doing, making sure that they not only describe the actions they are taking to improve the school but also their impact
- ensure that the external review of governance is completed as a matter of urgency.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and the deputy headteacher, a representative of the Church of England Diocese of Manchester and two representatives of Tameside local authority. These meetings were held to discuss the impact of the work being done by you and your colleagues to improve the school since my previous visit. I also met with the Chair of the Governing Body, a charming group of well-mannered upper Key Stage 2 pupils, the teachers with responsibility for literacy and numeracy at Key Stage 2 and two class teachers. These meetings gave me the opportunity to explore how the school has changed since the most recent inspection. These meetings also helped me gauge the effectiveness of the actions you are taking to address each of the areas for improvement, identified by inspectors in the inspection report.

You accompanied me on a tour of the school where we made a number of short visits to lessons. I scrutinised the school development plan, senior leaders' evaluation of how well the school is doing and minutes of governing body meetings, held since the inspection. I also examined a sample of pupils' books to evaluate the standard of teachers' marking and the quality of pupils' work.

Context

Since my previous visit one teacher has left the school and another is unavoidably absent. Both vacancies are currently being filled by teachers employed on temporary contracts. The governing body has two new members. One is a diocesan appointed foundation governor and the second is a parent representative.

Main findings

Since my previous visit senior leaders have acted quickly and effectively to address the concerns raised in my letter. A new strategy for monitoring pupils' progress has been introduced. Data on pupils' attainment and progress is now collected every half-term and carefully analysed. This is enabling class teachers to identify, quickly, those pupils who are under achieving and put in place extra help to get them back on track. This system is also being used competently by senior leaders and governors to hold class teachers to account for the standards achieved by their pupils.

With the agreement of governors you have reorganised the way that mathematics is taught in the school, grouping students by ability in Year 5 and Year 6. This is enabling teachers to closely match their teaching to students' needs, ensuring that all groups are suitably challenged.

All teachers have undertaken training to improve the quality of the teaching of literacy. This has resulted in pupils now making better progress in their reading and writing. The school's data are showing that this training has had particular impact in Year 2, where students' progress in writing is accelerating.

The school's current data are suggesting that all groups of pupils are now making much better progress in reading, writing and mathematics than they were prior to the inspection; with no appreciable difference in progress between those pupils entitled to free school meals and their peers. However, the data for reading and mathematics needs to be viewed with a degree of caution as it has not been validated externally.

The quality of teachers' classroom practice is regularly checked by senior leaders and teachers with subject responsibility. They use a range of strategies including short visits to lessons to look at a particular aspect of teaching and longer whole lesson observations. Teachers then receive feedback, affirming the strengths of their classroom practice as well as areas for improvement. These areas for improvement are then followed up at the next observation and are also used to identify teachers training needs. Senior leaders' records indicate that as a result of this strategy, the quality of teaching and learning across the school is improving with no inadequate practice and much that is good. However, you and the governors are aware that rate of improvement for some teachers needs to accelerate in order to bring all teaching in the school up to the standard of the best.

Teachers' marking of pupils' work has improved since my previous visit. Teachers mark pupils' work regularly and in line with school policy. Teachers describe what the pupil has done well and point out what needs to be done to make the work even better, which the pupil then acts on. This strategy is having a positive impact on pupils' progress.

Senior leaders have re-written the post-Ofsted action plan in the light of my last visit. It now provides a much clearer route for the school to follow on its journey of improvement.

You and your colleagues evaluation of how well the school is doing is detailed and is aligned to Ofsted's current inspection framework. However, in places it can be too descriptive and there is not enough emphasis on how you are measuring the impact of the actions being taken to improve the school

Strengths in governance, noted at my previous visit, have been maintained. Governors provide a good balance between supporting senior leaders in their work and holding them to account for its impact. However, the external review of governance in order to determine how this aspect of the school's leadership could be improved even more has yet to be completed.

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 continues to receive effective support from the local authority. A local authority adviser visits the school once every half-term to quality assure the work that senior leaders and managers are doing to improve the school and provide advice and guidance as appropriate. The local authority has helped broker successful links with another school which has resulted in teachers visiting this school to learn from their good practice. A local authority officer is carrying out the external review of governance, however this has yet to be completed and, as a result, the full impact of this review has yet to be realised.

Since my previous visit the school has been effectively supported by an adviser from the education department of the Church of England Diocese of Manchester. She has worked with you to evaluate and improve the quality of teaching and learning and helped you revise the school development plan

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Tameside and the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Manchester.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector