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Mr Stephen Passey
Headteacher
John Watson School
Littleworth Road
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Oxford
Oxfordshire
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Dear Mr Passey

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to John Watson School

Following my visit to your school on 29 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 November 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:

- develop effective systems for collecting, measuring and analysing information about pupils' achievements, in order to identify gaps quickly and accelerate progress
- ensure that pupils have more opportunities in all subjects to develop their writing skills, including extended writing where appropriate.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, senior leaders, middle leaders and governors to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I also had a telephone conversation with two representatives from the local authority and the headteacher of the co-located secondary school. The school improvement plan was evaluated. I went on a tour of both school sites with senior leaders to observe teaching. I looked at some examples of pupils' work.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection, one teacher has left the school. A third deputy headteacher took up her post at the start of the summer term. Several changes in the deployment of staff have been made, including the appointment of leaders for key stages, mathematics and English.

Main findings

Following the section 5 inspection you took swift action to re-energise staff and strengthen leadership in the school. You quickly identified that there were valuable strengths in your existing team of leaders and teachers. By giving them defined roles and holding them responsible, you renewed their commitment and unlocked their sense of purpose. You also appointed a third deputy headteacher, to strengthen the team further. All the leaders I spoke to during the monitoring inspection expressed relief that they now have strong direction and a clear mandate to make improvements. One leader commented that she had 'longed to take on a leadership role and now I have it'. Others said that now their opinions count; they are listened to and actions to improve the school are actually implemented. Everybody I spoke to during the monitoring inspection commented on the intense focus on improvement and the 'dramatic' change. You have transformed the school and placed learning at its heart.

The action plan to improve the school is detailed and shows considerable reflection. However, some aspects of the plan are unwieldy and overcomplicated. The plan indicates how evidence will be used to show that improvements have been made, but does not demonstrate explicitly how governors will monitor improvements and hold school leaders to account.

Key stage and subject leaders have a more accurate view of pupils' achievement because they are now expected to collect information about their progress more regularly. Teachers mark and respond to pupils' work more frequently, so pupils' day-to-day achievements are clear and easy to check. Teachers are setting pupils more ambitious long-term targets as part of their individual plans. Targets are also displayed in classrooms as encouragement for pupils and crucial visual reminders for

staff. Pupil progress meetings are conducted more rigorously to promote higher expectations of learning. The school now holds much more information about pupils' achievement. However, you have not developed an effective system to help you identify those pupils at risk of not making enough progress.

Teachers plan together more efficiently and share good practice and resources. As a result, teaching is improving. Tried and tested resources have been obtained to tackle some pupils' particular difficulties with phonics and mathematics. Well-planned lessons and the intelligent choice of materials are helping pupils to master skills and gain confidence, particularly in Key Stage 2. Teachers in these classes sensitively and promptly respond to pupils' successes or difficulties, reinforcing learning and providing further challenge. As a result, pupils make progress and thrive. Teaching assistants are now being given greater direction and are working more effectively to support pupils' learning. Significant improvements have been made to the classrooms: materials are stored tidily, displays enhance learning where appropriate and walls are decorated more soothingly to reduce visual distractions.

Bold decisions about the deployment of staff have resulted in significant improvements to teaching and have also had a positive impact on pupils' behaviour. This was particularly evident in Key Stage 1 classes. During the monitoring inspection it was clear that pupils are now in the habit of concentrating with impressive dedication on focused shared reading of a story. Pupils then moved smoothly on to stimulating and well-planned activities matched to their individual abilities. Teachers and teaching assistants took every opportunity to develop key communication skills, while pupils were calmly and happily involved in learning alongside each other.

Governors made the most of the advice and guidance given during the external review of governance. More training has taken place and the Chair of Governors has ensured that systems of communication are more efficient. New appointments to the governing body have resulted in a better balance of skills and experience and a streamlined committee structure has resulted in greater focus and drive. Governors have a more accurate picture of how the school is doing and welcome the way that you present information about the school's performance. They are now in a much stronger position to challenge school leaders, ask searching questions and provide parents with the assurance that pupils are receiving a higher standard of education.

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 benefits from links with other schools as part of a local partnership. School leaders have worked with the co-located secondary school on the moderation of pupils' assessments and better deployment of teaching assistants. School leaders have also taken the time to build links with similar schools, attend training and undertake useful research. Following the section 5 inspection the local authority provided some generic support for leadership, but did not provide specific guidance related to the key areas for improvement in the school. However, the local authority commissioned the review of governance and provided governors with helpful advice and support. The local authority has undertaken to provide school leaders with further advice about evaluating pupils' progress.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Education Funding Agency and the Director of Children's Services for Oxfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector