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Mr A Lasan
Headteacher
St Stephen's CofE Primary School
Bent Spur Road
Kearsley
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Dear Mr Lasan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Stephen's CofE Primary School, Bolton

Following my visit to your school on 21 May 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:

- revise the improvement plan so that it gives precise information about the actions to be taken to improve the school to good and includes how leaders and governors will make sure these have a positive effect on pupils' achievement over the next school year
- ensure that teachers consistently support pupils' learning by effectively using the new approaches to marking and feedback
- ensure that training for teachers leads to shared understanding and implementation of effective practice, particularly in mathematics.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, subject leaders for English and mathematics, pupils, the Chair of Governors and two other governors, a representative of the local authority and the school's improvement partner. Documents, including the school's improvement plan, were evaluated. Samples of pupils' work from Years 2, 5 and 6 were reviewed. Classrooms were visited, accompanied by the headteacher.

Context

The headteacher is working full time at St Stephen's. His additional role as executive headteacher of another local school for the spring term has ended.

Main findings

Senior leaders and governors responded quickly to the outcomes of the recent inspection. Planned actions to improve the school are being implemented. Although the impact of these actions is at an early stage, the pace of improvement is gathering momentum. Teaching has started to improve. Teachers are using learning from training and professional discussion to change their own practice. For example, in their use of tasks designed to check how particular activities have helped pupils to learn. Plans are in place to work with another school to improve further teachers' planning so that all pupils are appropriately challenged.

Senior leaders have revised the marking and feedback policy. Although there are more examples of effective marking, this improvement is not consistent in all classes. Teachers do not always specify clearly enough what pupils are expected to do to improve the work in their books or check that this has been done. The school's own survey work with pupils about marking in mathematics shows that very nearly all know what is expected in the new approach to marking but a significant proportion are not totally clear about what they need to do to improve their work.

Mathematics teaching is becoming more effective. Some teachers use real-life examples to help pupils understand new concepts better. For example, Year 6 pupils respond well to challenges such as working out the perimeters and areas of their own homes using data taken directly from satellite images available on the internet. I saw very effective practice in the Reception class where early mathematics learning was developed through physical education activities. Displays which give pupils information to support their mathematics learning are now prominent in all classrooms. Pupils say that they use these displays to help them make progress. While improved teaching is supporting better learning of mathematics, teachers still have to develop their shared understanding of the most effective approaches. A programme of training has been set up to support this. Senior leaders are using lesson observations to check that the training is leading to improvement.

A new approach to checking pupils' progress has been introduced so that teachers can identify patterns in the achievement of individual pupils and groups more

quickly. This information will be used in the regular meetings between leaders and teachers to review pupils' progress and identify more swiftly pupils who need support or challenge to make progress.

Senior leaders have re-written the school's improvement plan. While this identifies broad actions to be taken, it is too concise for leaders, governors and teachers to check that it is being fully effective. It gives no indication of actions to be taken after this school year. The plan identifies two occasions where there will be external validation of the school's improvement but it does not commit senior leaders or governors to continuing evaluation. The school's formal self-evaluation document has not been re-written since the recent inspection which means the plan and the self-evaluation document are not closely linked. The headteacher recognises that further work is needed to ensure the plan can drive improvement in the longer term. External partners are providing robust evaluation of the school; it is important that this is fully reflected in further planning for the next stage of the school's improvement.

Governors are providing more challenge to school leaders. This is particularly effective in relation to mathematics. Governors, together with representatives of the local authority and the diocese, meet with senior leaders in the 'raising achievement group'. This committee is monitoring and evaluating the school's progress following the inspection. Governors take part in training to develop their own skills and are using links with other schools to help them reflect on their own practice.

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 is providing effective support and clear challenge to school leaders. The work of the school improvement professional who has had a particular role in the school since the recent inspection and the school improvement partner who has a longer term responsibility complement each other well. The local authority provides leadership for the 'raising achievement group', has organised a link with a local effective school and provided training for teachers. St Stephen's has also sought out contact with other local schools where these can add to the expertise of teachers. For example, it has established a link with a Specialist Leader of Education for mathematics through Ladywood Teaching School.

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

Yours sincerely

David Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector