

Tribal
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk **Direct T** 0117 311 5307
www.ofsted.gov.uk **Email:** rachel.evans@tribalgroup.com



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Mrs Halden Eady
Headteacher
St Mary Magdalen Catholic Primary School
Spring Street
Brighton
East Sussex
BN1 3EF

Dear Mrs Eady

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary Magdalen Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 19 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:

- Develop a single improvement plan to ensure that:
 - progress targets are set based on pupils' different starting points
 - the responsibilities of school staff for doing the tasks in the plan, are clear
 - the responsibilities of governors for measuring its impact, are clear
 - more able pupils are identified for a special focus.

- The Local authority should take further action to:
 - broker a partnership with a good or better school which serves a very similar range of children and families
 - maintain a high level of challenge so that the school keeps aspiring for all its pupils to achieve the expected standard or above
 - support the school to maintain and develop its senior leadership.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and the deputy headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and another governor, and a representative of the local authority, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I visited all the classrooms and analysed a range of documentation. This included the school's improvement plans, records of governing body meetings, and records of local authority advisory visits.

Context

The Reception class teacher left at Easter. A current member of staff is taking the class this term. The school has been unable to recruit a suitable leader for the Early Years Foundation Stage. The deputy headteacher will be leaving at the end of the school year.

Main findings

You have continued to lead the work to improve teaching. Most notably, teaching in Nursery and Reception classes now focusses firmly on ensuring that children gain the basic skills they need for reading, writing and mathematics. During my visit to these classrooms, I saw children sitting and listening carefully to their teachers, following instructions and behaving well. There was good evidence in both classrooms that children are being given opportunities to practise writing letters, words and numbers. The teacher's assessments show that this year, Reception children are already more prepared for the start of Year 1 than in previous years.

You have made intelligent decisions about which classes you place teachers and teaching assistants into. This is having a positive impact on progress in the classes where a high proportion of pupils need to catch up. In Year 6, you have created attainment-based 'sets' for mathematics and English. You have placed the deputy headteacher here to model good teaching and to ensure that these pupils make the best possible progress before they move to secondary school. You have worked effectively with a local secondary school to provide better opportunities for the most able pupils. When I spoke with a group of Year 6 pupils, they were confident about their move to secondary school.

You and the deputy headteacher check teaching regularly; you examine teacher's planning and pupils' work at the same time. However, you do not include a close enough check on pupils' progress. You meet regularly with each teacher to discuss their class. When you do this, you examine how well different groups are doing - the girls and boys, for example, and those entitled to support through the "pupil premium" (additional government funding for pupils entitled to free school meals,

those in the care of the local authority, or those with a parent or carer in the armed services). However, you do not check the progress of the most able pupils well enough, even though they were identified in the inspection report as needing more consideration.

The school's "post Ofsted action plan" plan addresses all the areas for improvement identified in the inspection report. A separate "school improvement plan" covers other areas such as curriculum development and assessment. This is overly complex and a single plan would be more useful to ensure all efforts are coordinated. It is also not always clear which member of staff is responsible for doing what.

The school's plans include targets for pupils' achievement in each year group. These are based on a calculation of the general progress needed for pupils to reach age related standards when they are 7 or 11. This overlooks the fact that many pupils are behind already and need to make accelerated progress if they are to meet this standard, and that some pupils are capable of exceeding the standard.

The governing body is taking effective action to build on its strengths and has commissioned the advice of a National Lead Governor. The Chair of the Governing Body recognises the need for governors to focus on checking and measuring the school's improvement, and the progress of pupils, rather than becoming involved in the actual running of the school. There is not enough detail in the current improvement plans about exactly how governors will do this. The Chair is also aware of the need to balance the skills and backgrounds of governors as recruitment opportunities arise. The local authority is keen to encourage links with other local schools. However they, and the school, have not been proactive enough in seeking examples of good schools beyond the local area working in similar contexts, so as to learn from them.

External Support

The local authority knows the school well and the inspection findings chime with its evaluation of the school. Wide ranging support is being provided, including arranging the National Lead Governor's involvement, providing training and development for teachers and help to develop the school's curriculum. The improvement in Nursery and Reception classes is an example of the impact of this support and the local authority has provided funding for extra staff in these classes. Nevertheless, local authority staff notes of visit do not always reflect high ambition for all pupils. The local authority's service for pupils learning English as an additional language is making a real difference to some pupils. The local authority is keen to review and refocus this support where it will have the greatest impact on pupils' progress.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Siân Thornton

Her Majesty's Inspector