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Mrs Helen Craig and Mrs Sue Crace
Headteachers
Downham Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School
Church Road
Ramsden Heath
Billericay
CM11 1NU

Dear Mrs Craig and Mrs Crace

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Downham Church of England Voluntary Controlled Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 02 June 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 January 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:

- clearly identify, in the next action plan, how and when the impact of actions taken to bring about improvement will be monitored and evaluated by senior leaders and governors.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school development plan and the termly action plan were evaluated and I scrutinised assessment and monitoring information. We made short visits to each class, looked at pupils work and spoke to them about their learning.

Context

At the time of the inspection, you had worked to appoint a new leadership team to replace staff that had left but had, however been unsuccessful in finding suitably experienced practitioners. Since then you have made these appointments and a new leadership team is in place for the start of the autumn term.

Main findings

Following the inspection, you reviewed your school development plan and sharpened the actions you are taking through introducing a focused short-term plan which identifies the actions to take place before the end of this term. Your analysis of the progress pupils are making is more detailed and you are holding staff more rigorously to account for the progress of the pupils they teach. Teachers are using improved information about the achievement of the different groups of pupils they teach and this is leading to better progress. The plan does not include enough detail about how the success of the actions you are taking will be monitored over time. Consequently, governors cannot confidently evaluate improvement.

You have been supported by governors to take rigorous action to improve the quality of teaching; there is however still some instability in staffing this term. To address this, you have established a new staffing structure for September which brings increased leadership capacity.

Teachers have observed good teaching in your own and other schools and are being supported to improve their practice drawing on these visits. You have reviewed the school's marking policy and your evidence as well as our visits to classes shows that in most classes, marking and feedback is helping pupils to understand how well they are doing and what the next steps in their learning are.

To keep parents informed of improvements and the changes that are happening in school, you are implementing monthly forums through which information will be shared and questions and concerns answered.

The Chair of Governors has developed a thorough understanding of the school's strengths and of the areas requiring improvement. There is good evidence in minutes of meetings and her visit reports that challenging questions are asked and that support is provided for difficult decisions. New members who bring appropriate experience to support the drive for improvement have been appointed.

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

You have acted on local authority advice regarding your action plan and advisers provided effective support at a meeting with parents following the last inspection. Governors have requested that the local authority undertake a review of governance to ensure their work continues to drive improvement.

You have engaged strongly with the Billericay Community Trust through which you have accessed training for teachers on the outstanding teaching programme. Through this, you also draw on the services of a privately commissioned adviser to provide training for staff and to quality assure aspects of your leadership. These strategies are supporting the rapid improvement of the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Prue Rayner
Her Majesty's Inspector