

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 0300 1231231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566863
Direct F 01695 729320
Direct email:
jbennett@cfbt.com



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Miss Abigail Wright
Headteacher
St Thomas CofE Primary School, Halliwell
Eskrick Street
Bolton
Lancashire
BL1 3JB

Dear Miss Wright

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Thomas CofE Primary School, Halliwell, Bolton

Following my visit to your school on 12 June 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 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:

- review the action plan to ensure that clear strategies are identified which focus on simple, but specific, ways in which teachers can improve their classroom practice in order to raise standards across the school
- ensure that strategies to improve reading, writing and mathematics are applied rigorously across the school and that all teachers follow school guidelines
- develop middle leaders so that they can support teachers to build up their confidence and subject knowledge to enable them to deliver quality lessons, across the full range of subjects, which also develop pupils' writing and communications skills
- build into performance management objectives clear targets linked to improving subject knowledge and pedagogy.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with yourself, the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors as well as a group of pupils from Year 6. A meeting was also held with the local authority adviser to discuss the action taken since the last inspection and the level of support provided. I held a short telephone conversation with the headteacher from Brandwood Primary School, which is providing school-to-school support and I also had a discussion with a teacher about the level of support and training she was receiving. The school's development plan was evaluated. In addition, a learning walk, with yourself, focused on reading and literacy and the consistency with which this was being applied across the school.

Context

Very recently the school has been able to recruit staff to a number of key leadership roles including that of deputy headteacher and Key Stage 1 leader. As a result, the school will have a full permanent senior leadership team in place for the beginning of the new academic year in September. Currently, the school has a depleted senior leadership team. The deployment of teaching assistants is also being re-organised.

Main findings

The post-inspection action plan addresses the key issues identified in the recent inspection report. There are clear and manageable strategies in place to improve the effectiveness and deployment of support staff, for example. Good procedures are outlined to monitor both pupils' work and the quality of the teaching they receive. What is less clear is how teaching is to be actually improved. The plan currently lacks the specific details that get down to the 'nitty gritty' of what the school sees as good classroom practice. Links with a local school are developing well and good practice is being shared about planning, for example, but currently there is a lack of specific strategies of how a teacher can improve his/her teaching in science and subjects other than English and mathematics. Teachers still lack the subject knowledge and confidence to teach language rich subjects such as science, history or geography well. As a result, pupils' writing in these subjects is nowhere near the good quality of the work in their English books.

Pupils who were interviewed recognised that there had been positive changes since the inspection. A new fence had been erected which ensures that the school site is more safe and secure and that public access is restricted. Pupils have also noticed that marking has improved with teachers no longer identifying that a word has been spelt incorrectly or that a punctuation mistake has been made. Instead, they identify that there is an error by highlighting this at the end of the line of writing. There is now an expectation that pupils search for this and correct it themselves. Pupils identified that they enjoyed this challenge and were positive that it was, not only, improving their spelling, punctuation and grammar but that it was also developing their independence and providing a challenge. There is also now more problem solving in mathematics than previously. Pupils also pointed out that they would like more frequent lessons across a range of subjects, other than English and mathematics, in which they could practice their writing and numeracy skills.

There remain some inconsistencies across the school in how subjects and certain key skills are taught. For example, there is a lack of rigour in how pupils' reading outside the classroom is promoted and supported. Some pupils read regularly for pleasure; others less so. Year 6 identified that their books were rarely changed. Similarly, in a walk around the school we both identified the infrequency with which pupils' reading at home was encouraged, monitored and supported.

Some improvements which have been made will have a greater impact in the longer term. A calculation policy in mathematics is in place and the increased use of real life problem solving is commented on positively by pupils. Links with the partner school are becoming well established and productive, supporting teachers in Key Stage 2, in particular, to plan their work and observe effective practice. The school is trialling streaming in Key Stage 2 to support learning and ensure that appropriate work is set which challenges pupils. A new and simplified target setting system has been introduced, and is also being trialled in Key Stage 2, to make it more relevant and more easily understood by pupils. Monitoring, incorporating lesson observations alongside scrutiny of work is more directly focused on impact in the classroom. Equally positive, is the expectation that national test scores in reading writing and mathematics will improve this summer.

Governors are aware of the need to become more involved in the life of the school and they are now beginning to visit classrooms and interview pupils about their experiences. They are aware that the pace of improvement has been too slow and needs to be accelerated.

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

Positive steps have been taken to support the school to improve. The school has been on the radar of the local authority for a couple of years as being vulnerable and in need of support. The school receives regular monitoring visits and quality of teaching is the focus of external reviews. The school has been linked to a local school which, initially, has been very supportive in providing advice on the strategic management of the school and staffing issues. It is now becoming more involved in direct staff to staff support.

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

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow

Her Majesty's Inspector