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Jackie Roberts
Headteacher
St Nicholas C of E (VA) Primary School and Nursery
Six Hills Way
Stevenage
SG2 0PZ

Dear Mrs Roberts

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Nicholas C of E (VA) Primary School and Nursery

Following my visit to your school on 18 June 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 December 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:

- make sure monitoring and evaluation activities are aligned very tightly against the action plan priorities so that analysis is more rigorous and improvement is more rapid
- make sure that all relevant sources of evidence are included in judging the quality of teaching and learning so that leaders and governors can more specifically address the aspects that require improvement.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and other leaders, three governors, the deputy headteacher, and a representative of the local authority and diocese to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The school action plan was evaluated and I scrutinised other information including achievement data, records of the scrutiny of pupils' work and of the monitoring of teaching. We made short visits to all classes where we spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at their work.

Context

Three teachers have left the school since the inspection including the inclusion leader. A new special educational needs coordinator has been appointed from September. You will retire at the end of term and an acting headteacher has been appointed for the autumn term. Governors have processes in place to appoint a substantive headteacher from January 2015

Main findings

You have worked with governors, local authority advisers and a local leader of education to put together an action plan with appropriate actions, responsibilities and timescales for improvement. Supported by governors, you have addressed underperformance in teaching and while some positions are still filled on a temporary basis, have continued the improvement recognised at the last inspection. Staff are working as a collaborative professional team with a clear idea of the improvements required. As a consequence, pupils' progress is improving in most year groups and subjects.

Where the teaching of writing is strong, for example in Year 2 and Year 6, pupils have made good progress and standards are rising. There is however, still some way to go if pupils are to reach the higher standards of which they are capable.

Work led by the English and mathematics subject leaders has resulted in a better match of learning activities to the abilities of pupils, and changes made to the way teachers plan writing mean that pupils' spelling skills and their use of grammar and punctuation are improving. Pupils are given more opportunities to write at length in most classes. The English subject leader has improved the teaching of phonics. Significantly more pupils in Year 1 and 2 are already working at the expected standard compared to last year.

Leaders have undertaken a range of monitoring of pupils' work and of the quality of teaching. However, you have not linked these well enough to the priorities in the action plan. Consequently they have lacked sufficient rigour and improvement has not been as rapid as it could have been.

Overall evaluation of the quality of teaching does not sufficiently take into account the progress pupils make along with the quality of their work or the extent to which they are developing good attitudes to learning.

Governors have implemented more rigorous procedures for monitoring the impact of actions taken to bring about improvement including procedures to ensure the pupil premium funding supports improved achievement. They have supported you to address underperformance in teaching and have worked hard with the local authority to secure robust future leadership and teaching appointments.

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 support of the local authority improvement partner, teaching and learning advisers and the local leader of learning the local authority has brokered has been constructive in ensuring judgements about the school's work are accurate and the work of teachers and leaders improves. This has resulted in the school having an accurate perspective of its position and of the action it needs to take to improve further.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire and the Diocesan Director of Education for St Albans Diocese.

Yours sincerely

Prue Rayner
Her Majesty's Inspector