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Mrs Jackie Warburton
Headteacher
Harrow Gate Primary School
Piper Knowle Road
Stockton-on-Tees
County Durham
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Dear Mrs Warburton

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Harrow Gate Primary School, Stockton-on-Tees

Following my visit to your school on 4 July 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:

- ensure that monitoring of new initiatives maintains a constant focus on the progress made by different groups of pupils
- refine the school improvement plan so that there are clear milestone targets across the year to enable governors to readily identify how quickly actions are making a difference to the quality of teaching and pupils' progress.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, a range of senior leaders, three members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. At your request, I also spoke to a representative from Enquire Learning Trust, the school's chosen sponsor from September 2014. You accompanied me on a learning walk to each classroom where we observed the teaching of mathematics and spoke informally to pupils and staff. The school improvement plan, pupils' progress data and documentation regarding recent checks on teaching were evaluated.

Context

Four members of staff will be leaving at the end of term. Two teachers have been appointed for September; another is returning from maternity leave. Other positions are to be covered temporarily due to short-term absence. A new Chair of the Governing Body was appointed in June; one other governor has resigned.

The school will convert to academy status on 1 September 2014 and will become part of the Enquire Learning Trust.

Main findings

Over time, you have recognised that there has been too narrow a focus for school improvement. Past actions have been too reactionary and while the focus area may have improved, others have declined. Everyone now understands that improvement is about 'keeping all the plates spinning' so that the momentum of change secured in one subject can continue even when attention is diverted to other areas. Your priority to distribute leadership responsibility among a wider group of staff and hold them more readily to account for improvements in their subject has been crucial in moving forward.

Improvements to the leadership of teaching are beginning to make a difference to the quality of teaching. Although some inconsistencies between classes remain, more frequent checking of what goes on in classrooms, including cross-referencing direct observation of teaching with the work in pupils' books, is allowing you to respond to weaker practice with greater speed and precision. It is imperative that all leaders evaluate the impact of new initiatives based on the difference they are making to the learning and progress of different groups of pupils, if inconsistencies in how different groups of pupils achieve are to be addressed more rapidly.

An improving quality of handwriting from pupils and a greater sense of pride in the presentation of their work have been 'quick wins' this term. New approaches to the planning of mathematics are embedding and activities offer more appropriate challenge for pupils. However, much remains to be done to secure consistently good teaching as the norm. While you and senior leaders are aware of what is needed and by when, governors are less clear of your ambitions. School improvement planning does not detail your targets for how pupils' progress and the quality of teaching should improve as the year progresses. As a result, governors are unable to hold you fully to account for the work that has been undertaken.

The new Chair of the Governing Body has issued a 'call to commitment' to ensure all members are fully engaged in the school improvement process. Governors recognise that the questions they have asked in the past were more about seeking clarity than challenging you over the rate or quality of improvement. Planned training around interpreting data and amendments to improvement planning, as detailed above, will all facilitate more rigorous challenge in the future.

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

Local authority officers have had more direct involvement with you since the March inspection. Monthly meetings have enabled regular review of actions and modelled the process of monitoring teaching through evaluating the work in pupils' books.

Approval by the local authority for early partnership working with the Enquire Learning Trust has facilitated early school-to-school support within their network of academies. Best practice visits are already underway to improve provision in key areas of literacy and mathematics. Staff have valued these learning opportunities.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Stockton-On-Tees.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

Her Majesty's Inspector