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17 July 2014

Miss K Harper
Headteacher
Ashford, St Mary's Church of England Primary School
Western Avenue
Ashford
TN23 1ND

Dear Miss Harper

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Ashford, St Mary's Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to your school on Wednesday 16 July 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 May 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:

- add success criteria to the school improvement plan with clear milestones that directly relate to pupil outcomes
- create and foster a shared vision amongst the whole school community to guide sustainable improvement
- make more use of opportunities to share good practice within the school to improve teaching further.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you and one of your deputy headteachers. We completed short visits to classrooms, during which we spoke to pupils and looked through their work. I reviewed the school's development plan and we analysed the achievement of

pupils at the school. I met with a representative from the local authority and the Chair of your Governing Body.

Main findings

There are signs that teaching is beginning to improve. This is because you and other leaders are sharply focused on helping teachers improve their practice. For example, the coaching available to your staff to improve how they can help your most vulnerable pupils is starting to make a useful impact.

We saw other examples of how teaching is beginning to improve during our short visits to classrooms. We saw teachers making better use of assessment during lessons to amend how they were teaching the pupils. We also saw teachers making better use of questioning to help pupils think more deeply. For example, in a reception class, a child chose to play with 'treasure' in the outdoor sandpit. Through careful questioning, the teacher encouraged the child to develop a better understanding of subtraction. Teachers are more consistently marking using the policy that you have introduced. We saw pupils working hard across the school and as one girl in year 5 put it, 'My teacher now expects more so I am making more progress in my writing.'

The quality of teaching, as we agreed, still varies. Although marking is now consistently done, the quality is variable. Some written comments from teachers are not clear enough to show pupils how to make better progress and pupils are not yet making the most of the feedback they are getting. In lessons, teachers sometimes take too long to explain to pupils what they are learning, with too little time for pupils to do their work. You have accurately assessed what needs developing next and so are well placed to improve teaching further.

Levels of attainment in all subjects have risen this year in the Early Years Foundation Stage and by the end of Year 2, and are above national averages. The work you have done to improve the teaching of phonics (the link between letters and their sounds) has helped to improve how well pupils did in their phonics screening test this year. Results are above average. Pupils' attainment at the end of Year 6 has also risen in writing and mathematics. The number of pupils attaining at the higher levels at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 has sharply increased. Progress rates across the school vary, however, and this needs to become more consistent.

Leadership and management continue to improve. Under your determined and ambitious leadership you are beginning to create a culture that focuses more on pupils' learning. You and other leaders know what the school is doing well and what needs greater attention to improve. You are well supported by your deputy headteachers. For example, their recent development as professional coaches and mentors has added rigour to the school's work to improve teaching. You have used links with other schools well, for example, by giving teachers the chance to observe

outstanding practice. There are still opportunities being missed, however, to share good practice more within the school. Despite the positive impact of your work, not all members of the school community appear yet to understand completely how the school should improve further. It is crucial that everyone now works together to improve the school if it is to become 'good'.

The school improvement plan is well focused on the recommendations from the previous inspection. Your plans for continuing improvements are appropriate. As we discussed, although the plan is an effective tool to support improvement, it lacks clear success criteria that directly relate to the pupils' achievement at the school. It does not contain clear enough milestones to measure over time how well the school is doing and what difference is being made. These elements are crucial so that leaders, including governors, can monitor how effective the work to improve teaching is, and amend plans if necessary.

Governors continue to provide effective support and are proactively improving their work further. They work hard to carry out their responsibilities, but need you to develop sharper impact measures in the action plan in order to hold you and the staff fully to account.

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 continue to make good use of the local authority support that has been offered. For example, you worked well with local authority staff to review the impact of marking and feedback in the school. Some of the support offered by the local authority is not well enough matched to the needs of the school; for example, the support given with writing the improvement plan was not effective enough. More should be done by the local authority to support you in bringing the school community together to work under the same vision.

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

Yours sincerely

Matthew Barnes

Seconded Inspector