

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 566933
Direct F 01695 729320
Direct email:
ggleaden@cfbt.com



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Mrs P Cooney
Headteacher
St Marie's Catholic Primary School
Bigdale Drive
Northwood
Kirkby
Liverpool
Merseyside L33 6XL.

Dear Mrs Cooney

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Marie's Catholic Primary School, Knowsley

Following my visit to your school on 12 September 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 April 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action as follows:

- find external support to revise the action plan, starting with a fuller evaluation of information about learning and teaching, sharper timescales and clearer focus on improving children's learning
- review the school website so that information is up to date, including on English, mathematics, National Curriculum, special educational needs and pupil premium
- established teachers to visit very effective schools in similar contexts, to focus on expectations about pupils' writing across the curriculum, especially for the most able
- all teachers to give pupils more opportunities to speak for a variety of purposes - explaining, justifying ideas, giving examples and illustrations of their learning
- governors to ensure that pupil premium funding is focused on evaluation of individual children's needs, with information to monitor the impact on learning
- governors to arrange for the completion of their external review without delay
- Early Years staff to ensure that teachers across the school are well informed about the changing needs of children coming to the school.

Evidence

During the visit, I met you and other senior leaders, three members of governing body, and two representatives of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection and recent results, and I talked with the archdiocesan adviser. I evaluated the school's action plan and saw information that was on the school's website. We toured the school to look at the learning environment and I talked with a group of four teachers. Jointly with you and the deputy headteacher, I looked at samples of pupils' written work in English and other subjects to consider effects of school actions on learning over time. We met a random sample of children in Key Stage 2 to talk about their work.

Context

Since the school was inspected in April 2014, the school has had four new teachers who began work at the school on the week of my visit. Most staff have worked at the school for some years. Since inspection, results for pupils' tests and assessments in 2014 have become available. In Early Years 61% of children learned and achieved as is typical for their age group. For Year 1 children, results for the test in reading letters and sounds (phonics test) went up to 83%. Results at the end of Key Stage 1 were below average.

Results for older children fell in 2014 in every subject. At the end of Key Stage 2, the combined score for reading, writing and mathematics at level 4 or better was 54%, much below the national figure of 78%. Results for writing were particularly low, 61% gaining the expected level 4 or better. Reading outcomes fell markedly since 2013, the year taken into account by the inspection. In 2014, no pupil gained a level 5 in any subject. Action plans should be informed by full analysis of recent results. The school is pleased that pupils' attendance has increased to over 95%.

Main findings

The school's inspection was five months ago. As of last week, senior and middle leaders can track the progress of each pupil in a more systematic way. They have begun to take steps to ensure that teachers' judgements are consistent, such as arranging for staff to assess pupils' work together. However, key improvements got off the ground only recently. Leaders and teachers have not kept abreast with educational changes that have become normal practice in other schools. The amount and pace of change needed at St Marie's School is therefore challenging, coupled with the fact that results have declined since inspection. Across the school, leaders and staff are very keen to do better but find it hard to stand back and evaluate what has gone well or badly, as a firm basis for improvement. For these reasons, the school will need outside help to make the changes that are needed.

The school's action plan in response to inspection does not tackle all the necessary issues. The plan starts with a broad description of results in the last two years and the issues for action in the inspection report, as the basis for deciding on steps to improve. In the main part of the plan, the people responsible, costs, timescales are identified. There are some sensible steps for improvement, such as a regular cycle of meetings with teachers about the progress of children in each class and scrutiny of children's work.

However, the plan does not give a sense of urgency in tackling key issue like standards of writing across the school, spelling and reading. The earliest 'delivery dates' for many actions in the plan appear to be September 2014. Many actions are not due to be checked again until May next year. Most centrally, lack of pace was reflected in pupils' work. In some though not all science and English books the last piece of work was a single paragraph dated May 2014, when term ended in July. Punctuation and grammar in written work were generally sound, but spelling was a problem. For example, older children were not able to tackle word endings in 'ed', 'ly', or 'tion' in consistent ways. Spelling did not improve over time across different subjects. Written work in some year groups and some terms was better than others. However, for all children, especially those who are disadvantaged, every term and every lesson counts if they are to make good progress.

Older children have not been doing enough written work for different purposes, learning to persist with a piece of work at length, to plan and draft work, or to adapt the way they write, such as for science experiments or different kinds of stories. Work in science, such as in topics on space and light, appeared to be mainly worksheets and short answers. Work in English lacked variety. Talking with pupils, they did not have the vocabulary to discuss their work and what makes it successful. Answers were short, often one word. Pupils were polite and keen to please, but lacked confidence in speaking, a key skill they will need increasingly to present themselves in secondary school and later life.

School strategies focus especially on Year 6. The school has invested in extra teaching staff to split the current Year 6 class into two smaller groups of about 15 pupils each, to give closer individual attention. This is by no means wrong – end of key stage results certainly need to be better – but there is not enough thinking in the plan about work lower down the school and underlying causes of declining results. For example, there is not enough evaluation and commentary on areas where teachers may lack confidence and need training, coaching or support from other schools, nor is information about younger children's needs in learning used effectively. Without this deeper use of information, the plan skims the surface and does not guide action.

A further area to be fully explored as a basis for improvement is the changing needs of children on entry to the school in the nursery. In some year groups, children have made good levels of development in the Early Years. Recent results in phonics tests have also been above average. However, leaders and teachers described changes that are happening in the community and housing policy, leading to high levels of need in social development, language, communication. There are children's centres locally with information about pupils in need from aged 2. As the baseline of children's needs on entry is such an important starting point for the school's work, I would like to see the evidence on a future visit.

I compared the action plan to curriculum information on the school website. It was hard to find how the new information about pupils' progress in the action plan has affected policies about what is taught in subjects to meet children's needs in better ways, and lead to improvement. Neither the action plan nor the website make clear how the school is currently using the pupil premium grant to improve outcomes for those entitled to free school meals and looked after by the local authority, in total about 68% of children at St Marie's School. Again, I can see the effort that has gone in to make the website clear and attractive for parents but a number of policies on it are in urgent need of updating to account for national changes since they were written, including the policy for special educational needs.

Governors are very committed to the school as 'the hub of the local community' with growing pupil numbers. Governors were open about the inspection findings coming as a surprise. They assumed things were going well, as they had been some years ago. Governors had not asked challenging questions of school leaders. They have started to ask for regular information about learning, teaching and improvement. However, there has not yet been a governors' meeting to discuss this year's results. The pace of action on the part of governors also needs to improve rapidly.

Because of the need for the school to make rapid improvements, I will be returning to monitor the school. After that, 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 local archdiocese is keen to assist and has given moral and spiritual support to the headteacher and staff. The help of a diocesan adviser is planned to begin later this term. Vacancies remain on the governing body which the diocese could assist with filling.

A local authority adviser has visited regularly to help the school set up systems to track pupils progress and arrange visits to other schools. Local authority staff moderated school assessments in writing this year. Two local authority advisers spent a day observing learning and teaching across the school; they fed back to senior staff and to governors.

There is a balance to be struck between support and challenge because school leaders are responsible for improvement. The local authority made clear its concerns about last year's results. Results declined further in 2014 and school predictions were not accurate. The local has therefore used its powers to give the school a formal statement of its concerns.

- The diocese should assist the school to fill vacancies on the governing body without delay.
- The local authority should monitor school steps to address the formal statement of concerns.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Knowsley and the Arch Dioceses of Liverpool.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Comiskey

Her Majesty's Inspector