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Mr Rob Cooper
Headteacher
Comberbach Primary School
Mather Drive
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Dear Mr Cooper

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Comberbach Primary School, Cheshire West and Chester

Following my visit to your school on 23 September 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. 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:

- review the responsibilities of other leaders in the school and provide them with the skills and time to take a greater role in driving improvement.
- enhance the role of the governing body in checking the school's progress by:
 - ensuring their role and voice in the school improvement plan is clear
 - revising the layout of the school improvement plan so it becomes a key tool for the governors to check progress and hold senior leaders to account
 - reviewing the range and nature of governors' visits to school so they align more closely with the actions in the school improvement plan.
- exploit the links with a neighbouring school so teachers can observe and learn from best practice.

Evidence

During my visit, meetings were held with yourself, the deputy headteacher, two middle leaders, five members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I met with a small group of older pupils to find out their views on teaching, learning and behaviour. The school improvement plan was evaluated. Your most recent school data, including the 2014 unvalidated results for Years 2 and 6, were considered. I also looked at records of your checks on teaching. We visited each classroom to talk to pupils, observe them at work and to look at their books.

Context

Two members of staff remain on long-term absence. These classes are being taught by part-time teachers who have agreed to work full time for the foreseeable future. A new deputy headteacher and a part-time teacher took up post in September 2014. Two new members of the governing body have been appointed.

Main findings

Your resolve to lead the school to good is unshakeable. Your clear action plan shows you know what needs to happen; you are not afraid to make tough choices because you have the best interests of pupils at heart. The school is improving because you are building on the successful strategies to lift teaching that were already in place before the inspectors visited the school in May. You have the support and confidence of staff and the governing body. Although they are disappointed at the inspection outcome, no-one is quibbling about the judgement and all share your desire to eradicate weaknesses.

You have begun the journey to good. Nonetheless, you are under no illusion that there is still a mountain to climb, as so many aspects of school-life need your attention. Up until now you have single-handedly shouldered the responsibility for the school's improvement. However, the tide is starting to turn. Governors are beginning to up their game by providing stronger support and challenge. You are also benefitting greatly from the appointment of a deputy headteacher who has the skills and expertise to help you deliver your vision for Comberbach. You have become a tight and effective unit quickly, because you share an honest and realistic knowledge of the school's key shortcomings. Despite this positive step forward, the work of other leaders in driving improvement lags behind. As a result, you and the deputy headteacher continue to take on more and more responsibility. You are keen to give teachers the space to improve their teaching before tackling their leadership roles. While this is working in the short term, you and the governors know it cannot go on forever. The inability to share the load across a greater number of staff is your key barrier to success.

Everyone has been very busy and your actions to date are beginning to pay off. Teaching is better because staff training is carefully planned and gets to the heart of the matter. However, there have been too few opportunities to exploit the

partnership with a neighbouring school so teachers can observe and learn from best practice. The curriculum has been overhauled and whole-school policies and guidance are in place so teachers know what is expected from them on a daily basis. Time and energy has been purposefully spent on helping teachers understand how to assess the achievement of pupils in their class. As a result, school data is secure and gives you a firm foundation on which to measure progress against the action plan. The downside of this work is the revelation that standards in writing are not as high as they were thought to be across the school. Teachers are with you all the way and responding positively to the changes. All are following the updated marking policy; reading is promoted very well across the school and pupils are getting more opportunity to write at length. Teachers are relentless in tackling pupils' spelling errors and making sure pupils follow the handwriting policy regardless of age.

Teaching is checked frequently. Your judgements ring true with the picture I gained from visiting classes and looking at pupils' books. Teachers are in no doubt about what they need to do to lift their game because you provide concise short-term targets which are checked and checked again until the changes become part of the normal routine. This is beginning to pay dividends, although, as your own records show, there is still some distance to travel to make sure teaching is good in all classes each and every day.

Your own data show pupils' progress improved last year. This is helping to make up for lost ground. However, you are still battling against weak progress in the past and gaps in pupils' learning. This means pupils are beginning to make expected progress from their starting points, but too few are making greater gains in their learning. The 2014 unvalidated data is a mixed picture. Standards at the end of Year 2 improved and are above average. However, pupils' success rates in the Year 1 phonics check fell because this aspect of teaching was not checked closely enough last year. Year 6 pupils left the school over a term behind other pupils in the country. Achievement in mathematics improved and more pupils gained the higher levels. However, the results for writing declined and are below average.

It was a real pleasure to chat to pupils. They are friendly, articulate and keen to share their insightful views about the changes you are bringing. They are proud of their school and speak enthusiastically about the improvements to teaching which mean they are challenged by their work and excited by their learning. All agree they work much harder than they did before. One pupil captured the views of the group in the comment: 'It is all go, go, go!' Pupils say behaviour is better; but not perfect. They have mixed views about the renewed behaviour policy and the difference this is making to behaviour on a daily basis.

Members of the governing body are eager to do their bit; they are adamant similar criticisms will not appear in the next inspection report. Their desire to improve quickly is reflected in the speed with which they commissioned an external review of governance and drafted an action plan to tackle key weaknesses. Work is underway to reshape the make-up of the governing body to ensure it is fit-for-purpose. There has been a change in culture; new governors are being sought on the basis of their skills to enhance and complement the strengths that are already in place. New

governors are able to hit the ground running because there are clear processes in place to get them up to speed on their roles and responsibilities. Governors are giving their time generously by visiting school and checking on certain areas. However, this strategy is not reaping the full reward because activities are not matched closely enough to key actions in the school development plan. Although your action plan is a helpful tool for you and staff it is not working well enough for governors. They have no role or voice in the plan and the layout is not helping them to carefully track the school's progress towards success.

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

Since the inspection, the amount of support available from the local authority has increased. This is proving to be valuable. You appreciate the support and challenge from a local authority officer who visits the school regularly and is helping you forge links with other schools. Governors have benefitted greatly from the support and advice of a national leader of governance which has helped them get on track so quickly after the inspection. They are exploiting their links with the National College for Teaching and Leadership to update governors' skills and knowledge through training events. You are also using tried and tested external sources to support other aspects of the school; an external company has worked with teachers to improve their subject knowledge. The work of a school improvement professional is proving very useful in helping to validate your judgements on teaching and in pinpointing the small steps you need to take to reach your ultimate goal.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, and the Director of Children's Services for Cheshire West and Chester.

Yours sincerely

Joanne Olsson
Her Majesty's Inspector