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Mrs Catherine Mallard
Headteacher
St Begh's Catholic Junior School
Coach Road
Whitehaven
Cumbria
CA28 7TE

Dear Mrs Mallard

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Begh's Catholic Junior School, Cumbria

Following my visit to your school on 6 October, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report 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 July 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I looked at Year 3 baseline assessments and a sample of pupils' work with you. I met with a group of pupils and spoke to others when I visited classes during lessons. The school improvement plans were evaluated and I looked at records of monitoring and Governing Body meetings.

Context

Since the last inspection a new deputy headteacher has been appointed to the school.

Main findings

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 assessments carried out at the start of Year 3 are used to identify gaps in knowledge and skills and that teaching addresses these quickly
- use the new National Curriculum age related expectations to inform planning and assessment.

The School Improvement Plan contains appropriate actions to tackle the areas identified as requiring improvement at the last inspection. It is detailed and has clear criteria to measure success. It sets appropriately challenging targets for pupils' attainment and progress by the end of the key stage.

The main challenge to the school is to ensure that pupils make at least expected progress from their prior attainment at Key Stage 1 in every year group. In the past, pupils transferring from the infant school did not retain the high levels they achieved in standardised assessments at Key Stage 1 over the summer break and beyond. You are working more effectively with the new headteacher at the infant school to moderate assessments and ensure pupils make a smoother transition. However, teachers are not yet using information from baseline assessments as effectively as they could to plan teaching that fills gaps and moves pupils on quickly.

There is also some 'fall-back' at the start of each year as pupils move through the school. In some cases the targets set for pupils are based on their start of year assessments rather than the levels achieved at the end of the previous year. This means that expectations for progress in each year group are not as high as they should be for all pupils. You have begun to look at the new National Curriculum age related expectations and this is a helpful move forward. The next step is to make sure teachers are using National Curriculum expectations to guide planning and assessment.

You have taken effective steps to improve marking. Teachers show care and attention to detail in their marking and pupils say they find the comments helpful. The 'rapid response' strategy is extremely helpful in tackling misunderstandings immediately and making next steps clear. The teaching of self-correcting strategies and use of peer marking are very effective in some classes and these strategies could usefully be extended. Teachers have acted quickly to provide pupils with more opportunities to write at length in a range of subjects. Although it is too early to assess the impact of this on writing skills, it is clear that pupils enjoy exploring topics and writing about them in greater depth. During my visits to classrooms I observed pupils being attentive and engaged in their learning.

Subject leaders' roles are developing well. The subject action plans are thorough and identify the role of middle leaders in monitoring and evaluating progress clearly. The increased time allocated to monitoring is providing them with a comprehensive understanding of pupils' progress and areas for further development in their subjects.

Governance has been identified as a strength in the last two inspections. Governors show commitment to improvement, for example through attendance at a range of training and through their full participation in Governors' meetings. They have developed a useful 'Toolkit' to support their role and the detailed timetable of monitoring activities ensures they are well informed. The Chair is knowledgeable about governors' roles and responsibilities and has a full understanding of the challenges to the school.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. We agreed that a further support visit in the summer term would be useful in order to evaluate pupils' progress in each year group.

External support

The school is drawing upon external support effectively. The local authority adviser has provided good support through joint observations of teaching, provision of training and in the appointment of the deputy headteacher. The Strategic Improvement Meetings each half term are helpful in supporting review and evaluating progress. There are appropriate plans to ensure teachers can moderate work and share best practice with the infant school. The links with another junior school and an all through primary school are also helpful to support moderation of pupils' work and provide opportunities for subject leaders to share good practise.

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

Yours sincerely

Jean Olsson-Law

Her Majesty's Inspector