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Mr Ian Holden
Headteacher
St Mary's Rawtenstall Church of England Primary School
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Dear Mr Holden

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

Following my visit to your school on 16 October 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 June 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 arrangements for monitoring actions and evaluating improvement are clearly defined in the school improvement plan.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, your senior leadership team, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Governing Body and the Chair of the Governors' Standards and Effectiveness Committee, a group of pupils and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The leadership action plan and the school improvement plan were evaluated. I also considered documents including your records of progress being made by pupils currently in the school, your revised school marking policy and monitoring records completed by the school and by the local authority. I scrutinised a range of pupils' exercise books from different subjects and made brief visits to all classes.

Context

The substantive Key Stage 1 leader, who was absent at the time of the inspection, has now left the school. The Year 2 teacher has taken on this role on a temporary basis and the process of securing a permanent appointment is underway. The school is appointing a part-time teacher to share teaching of Year 1.

Main findings

Pupils' achievement continues to be highly positive, maintaining an upward trajectory in all aspects. Achievement was judged to be good at the section 5 inspection and has strengthened further since then. In 2014 all pupils in Year 6 attained level 4 or better in reading, writing and mathematics and the proportions of pupils attaining level 5 were significantly higher than national averages in each of these subjects. The proportions of pupils making and exceeding expected progress from their relative starting points were well above those found nationally.

The proportion of pupils achieving a good level of development in Reception rose in 2014. Pupils in early years make good progress overall, including those who join the school at the very early stages of speaking English and with skills that are often below those typical for their age. The small steps pupils make in Reception are carefully recorded and the school ensures that there is effective support for pupils and their families, including in helping them to understand English. The proportion of pupils achieving the national expectation in the Year 1 phonics check remained above the national figure in 2014 and progress continued to be strong in Key Stage 1, as evidenced by end of key stage assessments. Writing in Key Stage 1 is relatively weaker than reading and mathematics: this is a continuing focus for the school.

Your leadership action plan clearly indicates the steps to be taken for the school to be judged good once again. The action plan covers the areas for improvement identified at the inspection. Running alongside this is a school improvement plan that focuses on raising achievement across subjects. Although the actions in the school improvement plan are the appropriate ones, specific tasks and accountability for monitoring and evaluation of key strands are not always clearly expressed.

Teachers have risen to the challenge of developing a consistent, robust and rigorous approach to marking and feedback. I read some interesting exchanges between teachers and pupils, for example in a Year 6 book where the teacher had extended a pupil's thinking about the strengths and drawbacks of televising classic literature. Other teachers posed interesting questions too: 'What happened next to Little Blue Riding Hood?' 'What are the four parts of the rain forest ecosystem?', 'Explain how a single raindrop is a flood to an ant.' Pupils are keen to answer these supplementary questions that are personal to their work. As one pupil commented in discussion: 'Teachers really focus on what we need to learn as individuals. They challenge us to think in every lesson.' In mathematics, from the earliest stages, pupils are often provided with additional questions to consolidate or extend their thinking or explain their reasoning. Teachers point out spelling errors that pupils make and insist that they correct them. Sometimes they are encouraged to consider the effects of changing word order and grammatical structures: these challenges show teachers' good understanding of the individual stages of pupils' development.

Your senior leaders share your passion for the school and its improvement. With you, they have worked hard to ensure that all teachers in their teams work in consistent ways and demonstrate high expectations. Teaching was judged to be good at the section 5 inspection and your monitoring evidence, drawn from analysis of teachers' planning, observed lessons and pupils' work, indicates a continuing strong picture: hence the pupils' rapid progress. Since the inspection, you have sharpened and streamlined your systems for monitoring and recording evidence of teaching and learning. Pupils' progress is assessed more frequently now and your analysis of achievement by groups is more rigorous.

Your governors are totally committed to the school: they demonstrate this through their honest self-evaluation of their own work. Although the section 5 inspection did not explicitly require an external review of the use of pupil premium funding, governors commissioned this from the local authority in order to check that their practice was as effective as possible. They are in the process of completing a full skills audit. Governors have received other bespoke training from Lancashire Governor Services as well as completing online training. They are very positive about the clarity of information they receive from you through the revised format of your reports to the Governing Body.

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 school receives proportionate, well-directed support from the local authority. The Monitoring and Intervention Team (MIT) adviser has ensured that the school has received appropriate advice to address the areas for improvement identified as a result of the school's recent inspection. A consultant has provided training for all staff on the development of a consistent approach to marking pupils' work and giving them feedback on how to develop their skills further. The MIT adviser and school adviser attend meetings of the governors' standards and effectiveness committee. The school has valued the support that it has received; after an initial input this is now being scaled down in recognition of leadership's capacity to demonstrate improvement independently.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Lancashire and the Director of Education for the Diocese of Manchester.

Yours sincerely

Shirley Gornall

Her Majesty's Inspector