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Ms Brenda Fyrth
Headteacher
Thomlinson Junior School
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Dear Ms Fyrth

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thomlinson Junior School, Cumbria

Following my visit to your school on 9 October 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

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:

- revise the current improvement plan to ensure that there are clear lines of accountability and that targets are strongly linked to improvements in the classroom including clear, practical activities which are going to make a difference to pupils' learning
- ensure that whole school policies, such as the marking policy, are being implemented effectively across all subjects and that pupils are acting on the recommendations and as a result are improving their work

- subject leaders provide teachers with the resources and specific ideas to enable them to teach the subject element of each topic with greater confidence
- review the curriculum model at the end of term to ascertain if it is meeting the requirements of the new national curriculum and is appropriate to the pupils' needs

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with yourself, the new Chair of the Governing Body as well as several pupils from Year 6. A meeting was also held with two local authority advisers to discuss the action taken since the last inspection and the level of support provided. The school's development plan, the curriculum overview and other documentation, which you provided, was evaluated. In addition, a learning walk with you focussed on the teaching of topics across the school and how effectively this was promoting writing skills alongside subject knowledge and understanding. A brief telephone conversation was also held with the National Leader of Education who is now supporting the school.

Context

There have been some significant staffing changes from September. You have now been appointed as the substantive headteacher and a new deputy headteacher has also been appointed through internal promotion. One new teacher has also joined the staff. There has also been a restructuring of staffing with some staff moved to different classes or to new teaching responsibilities which make better use of their specialisms. In addition, a new Chair of the Governing Body has been appointed and governor responsibilities have been re-defined.

Main findings

Although the post-Ofsted action plan addresses the points for improvement identified in the recent inspection the focus is on setting up processes and actions for teachers and there is a lack of clarity in how these actions are going to improve outcomes for pupils. For example, the action 'to ensure that pupils have a clear understanding of how to improve their work' focuses on marking, monitoring and assessment with little reference to what is expected of pupils. Pupils interviewed identified that their teachers were attempting to provide regular and informative feedback, especially in English and mathematics but there was less evidence that pupils were using this feedback to improve their work. They expressed concerns that they were unclear about what they were expected to do. Routines appear not to have yet been fully embedded. Success criteria are sometimes too vague. For example, the book scrutiny identifies that pupils have three pieces of work of work assessed, without making it clear if this is over the year or over a term or how this is to lead to improvements for pupils. Similarly, improvement time is to be provided in

mathematics and English lessons but no suggestion that time will be made available in other lessons such as science for pupils to improve their work in that subject.

Standards have improved in the 2014 national tests, especially in reading and writing and these are now above the national average. Mathematics remains static at the national average. The greater majority of pupils are making expected progress but too few are making more than expected progress. There are clear gender differences, with boys better at mathematics but they are behind the girls in their reading and writing. This suggests that whereas the girls have improved the boy's progress has been less marked. In addition there continue to be inconsistencies across classes and a reliance on intervention for pupils to catch up. The school is beginning to address the legacy of weaker teaching which has depressed standards in the past.

Pupils who were interviewed were generally positive about the school. They have noticed that there have been some recent changes, notably in reading with much clearer routines in place, especially to support guided reading. Regular checks are now being made to ensure that pupils are reading at home. Pupils also identified that dictionaries and thesauruses were now more readily available on desks during lessons and they felt this was certainly improving their spelling and vocabulary. They did, however express concerns about topic work, feeling that there was often over concentration on literacy and writing and less on learning in the topic. As a result they found that the work could be mundane and repetitive and was not always challenging. Behaviour is good and pupils felt it had improved although 'silly behaviour' by boys in some lessons, usually not with their regular teacher, still disrupted their learning.

During the learning walk around the school, with you, we observed a range of topic work, mainly linked to geography. Some good work was observed in Year 6 which not only supported pupils' writing but also developed their geographical understanding of environmental issues, with good use made of sophisticated geographical vocabulary. Elsewhere, the picture was more mixed and it was difficult to determine how pupils were improving from one year to the next since younger pupils were observed attempting more difficult work than in some of the older classes. The curriculum is currently being developed and the overview is based on a four year plan with the same topic being delivered across each class in the school. Concerns were raised about potential weaknesses in this approach and whether pupils would be able to successfully develop and build knowledge and skills across the full range of subjects.

Governors recognise that, in the past, they have not been sufficiently rigorous in challenging school leaders and school under-performance. A more professional relationship is now being established and governors are being provided with more relevant and detailed information about pupil progress and how the school is addressing the weaknesses identified in the recent Ofsted inspection. The governing body has been re-organised and specific responsibilities have been clarified. Further

training is planned to enable governors to become more pro-active in engaging with improving 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.

External support

The school is no longer dependant for support on the local authority and is now part of the 'School2School' alliance - a local consortium of schools. Support is beginning to be brokered through these partner schools. Initially several teachers have used this opportunity to visit and observe effective practice, bring back ideas to use in their own classrooms and start to develop a constructive dialogue with other colleagues. Although initial signs are positive, this it is still at an early stage of development and any impact on improving practice in Thomlinson Junior school has still to emerge. Support for yourself has recently been brokered by the local authority, from a National Leader in Education at Dearham Primary School. The authority also continues with a monitoring role as well as providing ongoing support for governors.

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

Yours sincerely

Her Majesty's Inspector