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Mary Westley
Executive Headteacher
Hormead Church of England (VA) First School
Great Hormead
Buntingford
Hertfordshire SG9 0NR

Dear Mrs Westley

Special measures monitoring inspection of Hormead Church of England (VA) First School

Following my visit to your school on 14 October 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection. The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in January 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire and the Diocese of St Albans.

Yours sincerely
Linda Killman

Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter has been copied to the following:

- Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
- Local authority
- The Secretary of State

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching to good and better by:
 - giving pupils more opportunities to write at length
 - ensuring that all pupils are interested and involved by making sure that the work they are doing is not too easy
 - correcting errors in pupils' work and checking that they follow the advice they are given through teachers' marking.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels within the school by:
 - making sure that all leaders have the necessary skills to hold staff to account and know what needs to be improved to bring about rapid pupil progress in their areas of responsibility
 - making sure that the recent marking policy is used consistently across all classes
 - strengthening links with parents to ensure that they are all confident in the school's ability to provide the best education for their children.

Ofsted has made recommendations on actions for governance to the authority responsible for the school. This will include an external review of governance. An external review of the school's use of pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 14 October 2014

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector observed teaching in all classes jointly with the headteacher, scrutinised pupils' written work, and checked arrangements for the safe recruitment and vetting of staff. Her Majesty's Inspector also took into account data on pupils' achievement, the school's plans for improvement and the school's self-evaluation. She met with the headteacher, the special educational needs coordinator, a group of parents, two members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority.

Context

The school has changed its status. From September 2014, it ceased to be a primary school and became a first school, with pupils transferring to middle school at the end of Year 4. Two teachers and a teaching assistant left the school in July and have been replaced with two new full-time permanent teachers. The governing body is actively seeking to appoint a new permanent headteacher. In the meantime, as a temporary measure, the headteacher who is on loan, part time, from an outstanding school, has agreed to stay on until Christmas.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils' achievement is improving, although not evenly across all age groups. In particular, some of the vulnerable groups, such as pupils who have special educational needs and those who are eligible for the government's additional pupil premium funding, are not making enough progress. The most marked improvement is in the achievement in reading and mathematics of pupils in Years 3 and 4 last year. These pupils made consistently better than expected progress over time to reach standards that are above expectations for the age groups. The standard of their writing was lower than it should be, however.

In the 2014 national tests at the end of Year 2, the attainment of pupils was above average in mathematics. Standards in reading and writing were below average. From their starting points in Year 1, they made better than expected progress in reading and mathematics but not in writing. For three consecutive years, including in 2014, pupils' performance in the national Year 1 screening check in phonics (letters and sounds) has been poor. Last year, only two of the six pupils in Year 1 reached the expected standard. Stronger teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage is accelerating children's progress, particularly in their phonic knowledge. Children in Class 1 showed that they are learning quickly how to recognise the sounds represented by individual letters, to write them and to form the letters correctly.

Across the school, many pupils are hampered by a lack of phonics knowledge, and they have not developed neat and carefully formed handwriting. They have not mastered basic skills in using phonics to help them to blend sounds in a word together to read them or to break down a word into its individual sounds in order to spell it. Phonics is now being taught systematically across the school on a daily basis to help pupils to develop their skills rapidly but there is a hill to climb to make up for previously lost ground.

Writing is a key priority for improvement in all classes and this shows in the written work seen in pupils' literacy books. Most pupils are producing longer pieces of writing, with increasing accuracy in grammar, punctuation and spelling. Some are showing that they are learning from the points for improvement they are given by teachers in their marking. Pupils are practising their handwriting regularly to improve its quality but they are not showing consistently neat and carefully formed handwriting in all of their written work.

The quality of teaching

Staff have transformed the classrooms into well-organised, inviting spaces for learning, free from clutter. Resources to support pupils' learning are accessible and are now being used freely by pupils without having to be reminded that they are there. The quality of work on display has improved to celebrate pupils' achievements and to encourage them to aim higher in improving the quality of their work. Better teaching is accelerating pupils' progress. Expectations are explicit for them to complete a piece of written work in the available time. The marking policy is being implemented consistently. Teachers still tend to use worksheets stuck into exercise books when many pupils are capable of setting out their work on their own, especially in mathematics and in subjects other than English.

Teachers are using a range of interesting approaches to keep learning fresh and interesting, including proficient use of information and communication technology. In their planning, they are seeking to match the work closely to pupils' abilities. However, success in this is variable, with some of the less-able pupils finding the work too difficult or the more-able pupils working well within their comfort zone. Teachers are clearly focused on improving their teaching and they are responding to areas for improvement given by the headteacher in regular observations of their practice. They are working on ways forward in assessing how well pupils are learning in relation to the new National Curriculum requirements. Teaching in Early Years Foundation Stage is improving impressively, with provision designed to promote children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour is managed very well by staff in class and around the school. The school is calm and reflects purposeful learning. Pupils mix well, play safely together and no-

one is left out. Pupils enjoy opportunities to be consulted on things that are important to them. For example, they named the reflective garden the 'Golden garden' and enjoy meeting their friends there for a quiet chat at break times. Most pupils work with interest in lessons and their capacity to stick at something that they find difficult is improving. No lessons are interrupted by poor behaviour. Pupils know the rewards and sanctions. They enjoy having their successes celebrated in assemblies and share each other's moments of honour.

Attendance is average. The school takes persistent absenteeism seriously and provides helpful support to help families to get their children to school regularly and on time.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The executive headteacher provides strong leadership and has been central in developing a positive team spirit to move the school forward in achieving its goals. She provides well-judged support for staff, alongside polite but assertive expectations for improvements, especially in the quality of teaching. The quality of teaching and learning is checked regularly by the headteacher and external professionals from the local authority, with promising results. Outcomes are documented carefully and communicated to staff so that they are clear about where improvements are to be made. These are followed up rigorously to ensure that they happen.

The level of parental satisfaction is improving strongly. Parents appreciate the improvements in communication between school and home, and they find the headteacher accessible and approachable. The school is actively promoting its strengths in the local community with new branding to boost the number of pupils on roll.

Governors are monitoring the school's work through regular visits to the school. They study data about pupils' achievement and check that teachers are implementing the marking policy consistently. This is helping them to question, with increasing confidence, information that they receive from the headteacher on school improvement issues. They know where pupil premium funding is spent and are checking to see that it makes a difference in narrowing the gap in attainment between eligible pupils and their peers. Safeguarding requirements are met.

A suitable plan for improvement is reviewed regularly to ensure that a healthy pace of change is sustained in tackling the weaknesses identified in the previous inspection. The governing body has responded to an external review of governance by preparing an action plan designed to strengthen governance. Governors are holding out to appoint the right leader to take the school forward and are pursuing all the possible options available to them to make this happen.

External support

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the local authority has amended its statement of action. This is now fit for purpose. It specifies targets that are suitably challenging to raise attainment and accelerate pupils' progress. It sets out the actions that the local authority is taking to support the school through its journey out of special measures.

The local authority is working closely with the governing body to recruit a permanent headteacher and has brokered arrangements to ensure that, in the meantime, the school improvement agenda is driven forward. Advisers are providing staff with advice and training to strengthen their work in literacy and numeracy, early years provision, and in meeting the individual learning needs of pupils with special educational needs. Staff work closely with other local schools and benefit from the strong link that has developed with the executive headteacher's other school.