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21 October 2014

Alison Webster
Headteacher
Thatcham Park Primary
Park Avenue
Thatcham
RG18 4NP

Dear Mrs Webster

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thatcham Park Primary

Following my visit to your school on 21 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 July 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:

- simplify the school improvement plan so it is easily understood by governors and includes clear actions, roles and responsibilities
- provide clearer guidelines to middle leaders about their roles and responsibilities.

Evidence

During the visit, I met with you, the deputy headteacher and other leaders with significant responsibilities. I also met with two representatives from the governing body, including the vice-chair, and an officer from the local authority to discuss the

action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school's action plan. In addition, I scrutinised other school documentation including records of leaders' monitoring activity. I joined you on a tour of the school and visited every year group, taking the opportunity to talk to pupils about their learning.

Context

Since the previous inspection there have been several changes to staffing. A teacher with additional leadership responsibility is currently absent. Another class teacher is providing temporary cover for this leadership responsibility. At the end of the summer term 2014, a teacher with responsibility for Year 1 left the school. A newly qualified teacher joined in September, taking responsibility for a Year 1 class. Two other teachers joined in September, with responsibility for a Year 2 and Year 5 class respectively. A teacher with additional responsibilities, particularly for transition into Early Years Foundation Stage, retired at the end of September. A teacher with responsibility for a Year 2 class is absent; a temporary teacher now has responsibility for this class. A teacher with responsibility for a Year 4 class has resigned and will leave in December 2014.

Main findings

Leaders have responded positively, working with energy and ambition to bring about necessary improvements. Senior leaders have produced a set of very detailed action plans; however, these are difficult to understand because they are overly long and unnecessarily complicated. As a result governors and staff are not always as clear as they could be about the direction being taken. While I understand the need for a headteacher to hold this kind of detail, a simpler single document will help everyone fully understand your priorities.

Teaching is improving. Phase leaders, subject leaders and senior leaders all provide regular, helpful guidance to teachers. There is compelling evidence that the newly established 'peer mentoring' approach is working. Teachers are receiving helpful advice which, in turn, leads to personalised, bespoke support. Teachers who receive additional support, now plan activities which are well- matched to the needs of learners. Consequently teaching is improving and pupils are making better progress.

Senior leaders have made noteworthy changes to the teaching of English and mathematics. In these subjects, pupils are now taught in class groups, rather than in ability sets. Consequently, teachers are better able to promote pupils' mathematics and writing skills in other subjects. A recent parents' evening confirmed that parents are very positive about these new arrangements; they are confident they now receive more detailed information about their child's progress and attainment.

The introduction of the new National Curriculum has provided a useful springboard to revitalise the curriculum. When teachers introduce new topics, pupils discuss what they would like to learn about. Pupils are now more engaged in their own learning. In addition leaders have introduced a new approach to topic homework. 'Learning log' homework provides more exciting activities for pupils to interpret topic themes in a variety of ways. For example, in a Year 4 class studying 'fact or fiction,' pupils had the choice of a variety of tasks. Many elected to make papier-mâché models of dragons, others to design dragon playing cards and some to write newspaper articles. Pupils welcome creative tasks and say they enjoy these independent home learning activities.

Teaching staff have recently reviewed the marking and feedback policy. There is greater emphasis on providing pupils with more helpful feedback. Following writing and maths tasks, teachers now set mini challenges for pupils. Pupils say that they enjoy these as they help them learn better. Furthermore, teachers always acknowledge pupils' efforts. Consequently, pupils obtain timely feedback which promotes and develops their understanding well. Pupils also enjoy marking each other's writing. In a Year 4 lesson, pupils were confidently identifying sophisticated writing devices, such as clauses and similes, in each other's work. This consolidates their own learning effectively.

The staff have a positive attitude to changes and are very determined to work together to ensure the school is judged good or better at the next inspection. Middle leaders have received some useful training and this has successfully boosted the leadership capacity of the school. They have written helpful action plans and are more involved in monitoring activities. Middle leaders are responding well to new leadership challenges and enjoying, as one leader commented, 'greater influence.' As a result of middle leader expertise, teaching, including the quality of lesson planning, is improving. However, their roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined and, as a result, there remains some variation and inconsistency, particularly with action planning. These teachers would benefit from clear job descriptions setting out your expectations.

Governors continue to monitor the work of the school closely. For example, they check carefully on the impact of spending of the pupil premium, which is very successful in supporting good progress for a number of individual pupils eligible for free school meals.

HMI are likely to return to the school to provide further support and challenge.

External support

The local authority has provided helpful support, which includes ensuring the school's own assessment information is accurate. Leaders have found recent local

authority training events, including an assessment conference, helpful and stimulating. Equally, visits from local authority officers, have provided robust challenge and support to senior leaders. This is helpful and is contributing to the school improving quickly.

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

Yours sincerely

Elizabeth Farr
Her Majesty's Inspector