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Mrs Diane Bate
Headteacher
The District CofE Primary School
Patterson Street
Newton-le-Willows
Merseyside
WA12 9PZ

Dear Mrs Bate

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The District CofE Primary School, St Helens

Following my visit to your school on 5 November 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on 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 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 senior and middle leaders check the impact of their work more frequently to see if it is making a difference and to pick up any teachers who are struggling with the new ways of working
- make sure all teachers receive individual feedback on their performance over time and set precise targets to help them improve further
- draw up an action plan for the governing body so they know exactly what they need to do within the timeframe to become even stronger
- review how you evaluate pupils' progress so there is also a check on how well pupils are doing over time against their different starting points.

Evidence

During my visit, meetings were held with yourself, the deputy headteacher, three senior and middle leaders, six members of the governing body and two representatives from the local authority. I spoke by telephone to an external consultant who is supporting the school. I met with a small group of older pupils to gather their views about the changes in the school. The school improvement plan was evaluated. Your most recent school data, including the 2014 unvalidated results for Years 2 and 6, were considered. I also looked at records of your checks on teaching and a sample of minutes from governing body meetings. We visited each classroom to talk to pupils, observe them at work and to look at their books. I also checked the school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils.

Context

One senior leader left the school at the end of the summer term and three new teachers took up post in September. The leadership team has been restructured. There are two assistant headteachers and the deputy headteacher no longer has a full time teaching commitment. Another teacher has taken on a temporary leadership position to drive the Year of Reading project. One teacher remains on long term absence. This class is being taught by a temporary teacher.

Main findings

Although everyone is disappointed with the findings from the recent inspection, you, the staff and the governors are not wasting time dwelling on what might have been. Instead you are all looking to the future, using the inspection outcome to cement and renew your shared determination to improve.

You have taken time to reflect on what has worked well so far and what needs to happen next. Consequently, your carefully crafted action plan sets a clear route towards success, building on current strengths with clear actions to lift the quality of teaching and raise pupils' achievement. You are well on your way to tackling the school's key shortcomings because you are not starting from scratch. Your work in ensuring essential systems are in place means checks on teaching and scrutiny of pupil progress information are now custom and practice. The tide is beginning to turn, although there is still a mountain to climb to make the leap to good at the next inspection.

You are beginning to make headway in raising pupils' achievement. Nonetheless, there is still a battle ahead to make up for weak teaching and staff absence in the past. This has left many older pupils with yawning gaps in their skills and knowledge which means they are working below the levels expected for their age. This is reflected in the unvalidated 2014 results. Year 6 pupils did not make enough progress from their starting points and left school six months behind in their learning. There is, however, some cause for celebration. These results are the best the school has achieved for a very long while and pupils enjoyed much greater success in reading and writing. Although they fared less well in mathematics, your

own data show this was a one-off rather than a whole-school weakness. The decline in achievement over many years is being halted. Standards at the end of Year 2 held steady and matched the national average. This means younger pupils typically start Year 3 with the skills and knowledge they need to flourish. Your own data show there are still pockets of weaker achievement, but this is becoming the exception rather than the norm. Nevertheless, pupils currently in Year 6 have a long way to go to make sure they are ready for the next stage of their education.

Teaching is improving because of the range and quality of training teachers are receiving. You have spent time and energy wisely making sure everyone knows what they need to teach as well as how they should teach. As a result, classrooms have been reorganised to support pupils' learning, teachers are following the marking policy and everyone is sticking to the new systems for planning. Your drive to improve reading is beginning to bear fruit. The recently launched Year of Reading is sparking pupils' interest and enthusiasm for reading. They are reading more often around school and at home; their knowledge of authors is increasing because of the new books available to them and they are more inclined to put pen to paper because they see the purpose of the writing tasks. Teachers are tackling basic errors in pupils' work, particularly where they make mistakes with spelling and punctuation. However, some pupils struggle to use grammar correctly and a few do not have the words to articulate their ideas confidently.

Other leaders are backing you to the hilt; they share your vision and your eagerness to improve the school. Everyone knows they have a role to play and all are keen to do their bit. These leaders are beginning to make a strong contribution to improving teaching through whole-school training, support for individual teachers and clear guidance for planning lessons. However, they are not checking the impact of their work frequently enough to see if it is having the desired effect; to make sure everyone is following agreed policies and to identify teachers who may be struggling with new ways of working. You keep a close eye on the quality of teaching, but you do not always provide teachers with individual feedback and enough precise guidance to help them raise their game quickly.

Pupils are fiercely proud of their school and keen to point out all of the strengths. They say teaching is getting better and they are working harder. A comment from one pupil sums up nicely the views of all on the changes: 'Our work is not unbearably difficult, but it is challenging'. Pupils are glowing in their praise for the work teachers do to make learning fun. They think the inspector's views of behaviour are spot on. They agree behaviour is good but some occasional silly behaviour stops it being any better.

The governing body has a good handle on the school. They are ambitious for the future and are in no doubt about the challenging journey ahead. Governors know the barriers that sometime get in the way of pupils' learning, but they do not accept these as excuses. They have invested heavily in ensuring the right staff are in place and teachers have the resources to do the job well. Following the inspection, governors have reviewed the type and nature of information they receive from the headteacher to make sure they gain a rounded view of the school. As a result, they

are able to offer informed challenge. They are beginning to find out about your progress first hand by visiting school more frequently and meeting with other leaders. They are not content to sit still. They have already taken stock of their own skills although they are in the early stages of drawing up an action plan to identify what they need to do to become even stronger. Governors have a good grasp of data. However, they are not getting the full story about pupils' progress over time because the information they receive only looks at the gains pupils make across one year and not from their different starting points.

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

You are keen to take advice and you are drawing on a range of available support to bring about improvement. Following your attendance at a mathematics conference led by Her Majesty's Inspectors you have changed your systems for checking on mathematics teaching. As a result, you are focusing on teachers' subject knowledge and pupils' growing confidence in mathematics. The work of an external consultant is helping you to judge the quality of teaching accurately. You are tapping into a local teaching school alliance, using the expertise to improve the way teachers' mark books and to lift the skills of other leaders in keeping an eye on pupils' learning. You continue to benefit from a local leader in education who is a sounding board for your ideas and a partner is brokering support for the school.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for St Helens and the Director of the Diocese of Liverpool.

Yours sincerely

Joanne Olsson
Her Majesty's Inspector