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Mrs P Cooney
Headteacher
St Marie's Catholic Primary School
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Dear Mrs Cooney

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Marie's Catholic Primary School, Knowsley

Following my visit to your school on 6 November 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in April 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 action as follows:

- the headteacher should embed very recent improvements to assessment, teaching and learning so that they become routine and lead to better standards over time
- the headteacher and senior leaders should ensure that marking and assessment of children's work is accurate and that it better influences curriculum planning
- the English leader to add to the new 'writing journeys' policy with more about motivating reasons to write and consistent marking of spellings
- the headteacher to enable the English leader to observe in other classes to help embed the new policy in practice
- teachers to model Standard English in speaking and listening with children
- governors to revise the job descriptions of the headteacher and deputy headteacher to more accurately reflect changes to their roles
- governors to secure training on understanding data, and to decide on a governor to oversee training needs and its impact more generally
- governors to agree with senior staff a more useful format for presenting data.

Evidence

During the visit I met you, the deputy headteacher, members of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and a diocesan adviser to discuss action taken since my last visit, and its impact. I met two groups of pupils in Year 4 and Year 6 and considered a range of their written work with them. I evaluated the school action plan and a range of related papers. I looked at documentation on assessment and moderation from Early Years to Year 6, recent external reviews by the local authority, the external review of governance, minutes of meetings of governors and the school's public website.

Context

By September 2014, the local authority and archdiocese had identified a headteacher from a local outstanding school to support and challenge senior leaders. The review of governance took place in late September. Four governors are new, including an experienced senior leader in a school in Liverpool and the head of Early Years in the local authority. The diocese has filled vacancies for foundation governors. The local authority has formed a Raising Achievement Committee with governors. Membership includes the archdiocesan adviser and heads of school improvement and Early Years in the local authority.

Main findings

This visit was only eight weeks after my first one because the school needed to be swift in tackling issues identified. On this visit, I saw more sense of urgency. Three things were important in deciding that the school is now making progress: realistic assessment, changes to governance and leadership, most importantly, improvements in children's work. However, improvements have been in place only a matter of months. They need to be sustained and embedded. Robust monitoring by governors and the local authority will be needed. After a longer period, it may be necessary for me to visit again.

Changes on the governing body have started to have a positive impact. The new chair is determined that the school will move forward. He is supported by four new governors who are experienced as education professionals and in governance. With the local authority, governors have formed a Raising Achievement Committee which questions and challenges. A key example of driving change is insistence from the committee on accurate assessment.

There is a new professionalism in dialogue with school leaders. You acknowledged that, until recently, children's work has been marked too generously. Predictions about likely results were not realistic. You explained that visits to outstanding schools in similar contexts have given teachers clarity about what children can achieve and new enthusiasm for change, a view endorsed by the local authority and diocese. With intensive help from the local authority, there is now a basis of accurate assessment from which to plan work.

On my first visit, I raised questions about the claim that children enter Early Years Foundation Stage with skills and learning much below age-expectations. Again, with much help from staff for Early Years in the local authority, using three years' information, you were able to demonstrate that achievement on entry is consistently low.

The deputy headteacher has been taken out of class to give more time for her leading roles in data, assessment, pupil tracking and co-ordination of mathematics across the school. I understand the need to work as a team but the distinct roles and responsibilities of headteacher and deputy were not always clear to me. Given new practices to start to move the school forward, governors should review job descriptions of these two key roles.

The revised action plan reflects a swifter pace in that milestones for change are set out term by term. The plan starts with a fuller analysis of results than before. Where this analysis is used well, the plan has a better focus on which pupils need help and why, such as those who cannot write confidently by Years 3 and 4. The body of the plan now shows who is responsible for each action. Actions now include bespoke support for teachers.

The lead teacher for English, new to the school in September, has begun to have impact. The new policy for 'writing journeys' is thoughtful. For example, assessment of children's communication and language in Early Years has been used to start new work with young children in rhyme, singing, and verbal games to build their confidence and skill. The plan would benefit from being more explicit about motivating children to write. I could see examples of this in practice in children's work, such as the day at Tatton Park when children role played Victorians. There would also be merit in writing down expectations about which spellings will be marked in children's work. I saw improved practice but a variety of it.

I was impressed by the growth in children's confidence in speaking and listening, and in their recent written work. Pupils in Key Stage 2 said that work had got a lot harder this term. Across a range of abilities, children welcomed the chance to do their best. In their view, behaviour had got better. Children tried harder and did not 'mess about'. Compared with my first visit, children spoke at more length, looked at me, and were audible. They often used complete sentences and gave explanations. For instance, pupils spoke about writing journeys using 'drafting', 'redrafting' and 'editing' work. We talked about the benefits of using past or present tense for different effects on readers in a horror story. Pupils used the correct terms and gave examples from recent writing, such as work on rules and instructions, inventing a game, autobiography and comic poetry.

It was good to see pupils putting right mistakes before they became big ones, such as a boy who began talking about a biography he enjoyed and quickly corrected himself by saying, 'Oh no, I mean autobiography because the author writes about his own life'. I also saw self-correction in written work, which was certainly longer than before. Pupils felt they were developing more 'stamina'. Though not error-free, basic spelling and punctuation appeared to be more under pupils' control. Pupils themselves were clear that self-checking did not just apply to 'English' but carried over to work in subjects like geography, history and science. Children had a new pride in their work, carefully signing recent poems with their names.

These significant changes need to become sustained and routine practice for teachers and pupils. I saw a relatively small sample and changes should be secure across the whole school. A further step is for teachers to model Standard English for children (for example 'I did' not 'I done', 'we were' not 'we was'). All of us speak differently at different times, with friends, at home, at school, at work. Children need the tools to match language to situation.

Appropriately, the school website gives policies for admissions, behaviour, and special educational needs with recent dates, together with curriculum statements for each year group and subject policies, 2014 test results and links to the recent Ofsted inspection. Information is free from jargon and understandable. The site includes information about governance, where the name of the chair could be updated. The site contains details about amounts of pupil premium grant, items of spending and results for children and entitled to the premium compared with those who are not. This could be enhanced by clearer evaluation of the impact of the substantial amount of grant, rather than simply stating the general level of results. The comments on better attendance move in that direction.

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 local authority has given intensive support and challenge in the last two months, in the form of regular visits from a school improvement adviser and Early Years Foundation Stage professionals, observing teaching and learning, interpreting data, moderating assessment and getting an accurate baseline, and organising a review of the school's website.

These visits have been instrumental in moving the school forward at a rapid pace. Diocese and local authority have worked together closely and well, in line with the revised school action plan, to ensure support is co-ordinated.

The diocesan adviser for schools is a member of the Raising Achievement Committee and identified an appropriate Catholic headteacher to support and challenge the school in role as a local leader of education. The local leader has helped you to sharpen up the action plan but is at an early stage of her time with the school.

Taken together, external support has been central to the rapid progress seen since my last visit. Now that the school is taking the right direction, sustaining the pace of improvement should now be in the hands of the school's leadership and governors.

- The local authority should take a monitoring role, particularly on use of data and assessment, with less frequent visits.
- The diocese should assist governors to find and take part in training on use of data as a whole governing body, and in more bespoke training for individuals.

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

Yours sincerely

Barbara Comiskey

Her Majesty's Inspector