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Mrs Ellie Lorenzo
Headteacher
Emmanuel Holcombe Church of England Primary School
Helmshore Road
Holcombe
Bury
Lancashire
BL8 4PA

Dear Mrs Lorenzo

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Emmanuel Holcombe Church of England Primary School, Bury

Following my visit to your school on 13 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.

This was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in September 2013. 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:

- improve the achievement of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage by:
 - ensuring the curriculum always matches the needs and interests of children in Reception
 - making sure teaching and learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage is checked frequently and rigorously
 - ensuring governors are fully informed of your actions to improve the Early Years Foundation Stage and are able to challenge your progress
- spend time finding out why phonics teaching has not been successful in the past and put swift action into place to halt the decline
- ensure the most able pupils do not tread water by providing levels of challenge that help them make better progress over time.

Evidence

During my visit, meetings were held with yourself, the deputy headteacher, a middle leader and four members of the governing body. I spoke by telephone to two representatives from the local authority and I met with the National Leader of Governance who is working closely with the governing body. I chatted to a small group of older pupils to gain their views on the changes that have taken place since the last inspection. We visited each classroom to observe teaching, watch pupils at work and to check the quality of pupils' work in their books. Your most recent school data, including the 2014 unvalidated results for Years 2 and 6, were considered. I looked at records of your checks on teaching and documentation provided by the governing body. I also reviewed the school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils.

Context

One teacher is on extended leave. This position is being covered by a temporary teacher. Another teacher is due to leave the school at the end of the autumn term. A new governor has been appointed. One member of staff has taken on a temporary leadership role.

Main findings

You have turned a corner and are making headway in eradicating the weaknesses identified during the last inspection. Your actions to improve the school are more effective because there is a greater sense of urgency, everyone is doing their bit and improving pupils' achievement is your number one priority. The difficult messages I delivered during my last visit were not easy to hear. Nonetheless, no-one lost heart; everyone brushed themselves down and set about tackling shortcomings with renewed vigour and determination. However, there is still a long haul ahead to ensure the school makes the leap to good at the next inspection. Despite moving more quickly towards your goals, you are battling to make up for lost time in the past.

Your work is beginning to reap rewards. Pupils' achievement improved in 2014. Almost all pupils made expected progress from their starting points. Standards increased at the end of Year 2 and Year 6. These are the best results the school has enjoyed for a long while and pupils started their secondary school over a term ahead of all pupils nationally. Pupils continue to do well in reading; many made strong progress in this subject. Although improving, not enough pupils made greater gains in writing and mathematics. Your own data show this success was not a one-off. Most pupils are on track to make the progress they should. Nonetheless, too few pupils are making better than expected progress and the current Year 2 pupils have quite a journey ahead to make up for lost ground.

You have invested time and energy to bring about improvements in Key Stage 1 and 2. However, as these areas of school are beginning to move in the right direction, other weaknesses are popping up. During their time in the Early Years Foundation Stage, not enough children gained the skills and knowledge they needed to get off

to a good start in Year 1. Children do not do as well as they should from their broadly average starting points because the curriculum is not shaped closely to their needs or interests. Pupils' grasp of phonics (the sounds that letters make) is weak. Almost three out of four pupils did not meet the level expected for their age by the time they left Year 1. This is having a knock-on effect across the school. Although it is not hindering pupils' ability to read, it is making a difference to their success in writing as many pupils struggle to spell accurately.

Teaching is improving over time because teachers are benefitting from quality training and individual guidance from you, subject leaders and external experts. As a result, teachers are making better use of assessment information to shape lessons; classrooms are supporting pupils learning and teachers are demanding more of pupils in terms of quantity, quality and presentation of work. Low-level activities that hamper pupils' creativity and stamina are now the exception rather than the norm. Pupils are up for the challenge. All agree they work much harder than they did in the past. One pupil reported: 'You have to have your brain in gear everyday'.

Everyone is following the marking policy; some teachers are leading the way, providing clear guidance to help pupils understand what they need to do to move on quickly. Others are following suit but are not quite there in making sure their feedback makes a real difference to pupils' learning. Teachers are much better at making sure pupils know what they need to do to succeed in each lesson. Pupils' activities are livelier because resources have been refreshed and teachers are thinking up new ways to harness pupils' desire to write. Teaching assistants are having a positive impact on pupils' learning because they know the purpose of the lesson and they understand their role. Mathematics teaching is better because you have introduced catch-up sessions which are helping pupils make up for gaps in their basic skills. Teachers exploit opportunities for pupils to write across other subjects more often. Teaching is definitely on the right track, but there is still work to do. Teachers are not quite getting it right for more-able pupils, who often tread water repeating work they have already shown they can do with ease.

You have raised your own game and are growing in confidence as you witness the difference your actions are making across the school. The partnership with headteachers in local schools has helped you to judge the quality of teaching accurately. You are taking decisive action where teaching is not good enough and targeting resources to those teachers who need extra help to improve. Checks on teaching are more frequent and the feedback teachers receive on their performance is becoming increasingly effective in pinpointing next steps. Nevertheless, the checks on phonics teaching, and the deal Reception children receive, lack the same rigour. Hence these areas are not keeping pace with the rest of the school. Other leaders are growing in their role; the responsibility for driving improvement is no longer your sole responsibility.

The governing body took my words to heart and set about improving their effectiveness quickly. They embraced the findings from an external review of governance and have not let the grass grow under their feet in tackling the identified weaknesses. As a result, they have a much better understanding of the school. They

know what is working and what needs to happen next because they visit the school frequently, meet with a range of leaders and keep a close eye on school data. They are increasingly confident in asking you hard questions about the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement. They have already identified they are not paying close enough attention to the Early Years Foundation Stage and are beginning to set up systems to keep a closer eye on this area of 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 local authority is providing close and effective support, responding to your calls for help with speed and appropriate strategies. They have helped you forge links with local schools which are proving helpful in making sure your judgement on teaching is correct and enhancing the skills of the mathematics subject leader. Local authority officers, including those at the most senior level, keep an eye on your progress. They have supported you well in streamlining the range of advice and guidance you receive so no-one is overwhelmed by conflicting messages or too many new ideas. Officers have already noticed the gaps in Early Years Foundation Stage and pupils' weaknesses in phonics and are taking swift action to get the school back on track. The support of a National Leader of Governance has been particularly helpful in harnessing governors' desire to improve. Skilful guidance has helped lead governors down the right path and set them up well for future success.

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

Yours sincerely

Joanne Olsson
Her Majesty's Inspector