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3 December 2014

Mr Andy Richbell
Headteacher
St Nicolas' CofE Primary School
Locks Hill
Portslade
Brighton
BN41 2LA

Dear Mr Richbell,

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Nicolas' CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 2 December 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. At its previous section 5 inspection the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. Leaders should take further action to:

- evaluate the impact of the recently introduced programme to accelerate pupils' writing skills at regular intervals and adjust their plans accordingly, where necessary.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the deputy headteacher, a group of pupils, and two representatives from the local authority. I also met with the Co-Chairs of the Governing Body to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. You

escorted me on a tour of the school, enabling me to visit lessons and see children at work. After the tour, I spent additional time with two classes that were specifically working on their writing. You provided me with a range of documentation to scrutinise, including your school improvement plans and records of the local authority's and your own monitoring activity.

Main findings

The outcome of the inspection which took place in July 2014 was a disappointment to you, your senior leaders, governors and staff. Nevertheless, you have correctly and resolutely put these feelings firmly behind you. Within a short period of time, you have set about ensuring that successes noted in the inspection are sustained and areas of weakness are properly addressed. You have produced a purposeful plan which correctly addresses the areas for improvement that were identified in the last inspection. Arrangements to monitor the plan, sensibly includes routine observations of teaching linked to a careful scrutiny of pupils' work. Through external validation, you have also wisely ensured that teachers' assessments are more accurate. This will provide the certainty you need when judging the impact of teaching on pupils' achievement. It was very evident throughout this visit that morale is high and staff determination to move the school to the next level is strong.

In particular, you and your governors have looked critically at your improvement strategies to concentrate your efforts on aspects which are both necessary and urgent. You have made writing a priority and have wisely decided to continue with the 'talk for writing' initiative, introduced just prior to the last inspection. Within the broader strategy, you are rightly targeting lower and higher attaining pupils, whose progress in writing has been identified as too slow.

From my tour of the school and my time spent in the two writing sessions, it was clear to see that pupils understand the benefits of 'talk for writing' and as a result, are moving forward in their learning. All pupils with whom I spoke were able to explain what they were doing and how this was helping them with their writing. In particular, they spoke with enthusiasm about how their spelling and grammar are now beginning to improve. Several pupils described how the new approach motivates them because they understand how well they are progressing. Pupils were able to illustrate this effectively by comparing examples of their writing in September with their current written work. One child spoke at length about how the spelling tests had broadened his vocabulary and provided the confidence to put 'new' words into his creative writing.

Another priority, to improve the quality of teachers' feedback to pupils, has been equally noted and appreciated by pupils. All pupils with whom I spoke agreed that feedback from teachers was comprehensive. During my visits to lessons and in discussions with pupils, I was able to see that work marked in their exercise books provided helpful advice and commentary. One pupil was fulsome in his praise of the

'continuous dialogue' between him and his teachers through the marking. He remarked that this had not been the case in the past and how valuable he found it. Others with whom I spoke concurred.

Leaders have also identified a further priority, to raise the level of challenge for all pupils at all levels. This is being systematically addressed in the following ways:

- a programme of ongoing targeted support and training for staff
- a revised performance management policy in which teachers' performance is linked to pupils' achievement
- setting pupils more aspirational targets with the aim of exceeding the standards expected for their age.

Pupils with whom I met were aware of their targets and most felt that teachers' expectations of them were high. However, it is too soon to judge the success of these strategies. Furthermore, one or two pupils in Year 4 did not agree and felt that sometimes the work teachers set is too easy. Equally, despite a re-newed focus on the use of success criteria to enable pupils to know how well they are doing across all subjects, these were not visible in all of the lessons that I visited.

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 provided timely and well-judged support. In particular, officers have sourced and funded well-tailored improvement strategies, notably the 'talk for writing' which is beginning to make a positive impact. Governors have benefited from a local authority review and training on the interpretation of the school's achievement data. This has enabled them to ask the right questions of leaders and has built their confidence in knowing how well the school is achieving, compared to other similar schools and schools nationally. A positive link with a good school, has also been made to provide support, challenge and share good practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Lesley Farmer
Her Majesty's Inspector