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18 December 2014

Mrs Judith Reay
Headteacher
Whitfield Church of England Voluntary Aided First School
Whitfield, Hexham
Northumberland
NE47 8JH

Dear Mrs Reay

**Special measures monitoring inspection of Whitfield Church of England
Voluntary Aided First School**

Following my visit with Belita Scott, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 17 December 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 2014. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Executive Director Well-being and Community Services for Northumberland and the Director of Education for the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2014.

- Rapidly improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better by: eradicating any inadequate teaching
 - ensuring that the development of children's skills, knowledge and understanding are assessed and recorded accurately when they start the school and their progress is carefully tracked so that their next steps of learning build well upon what they already know and can do
 - making sure teachers plan activities which provide challenge for all groups of pupils, including those of varying ages and abilities
 - providing opportunities for the teachers to share and learn from the very best teaching practices in other schools
 - ensuring that the role of teaching assistants in lessons is always clear and that their skills are developed so they can help pupils to learn effectively
 - making sure teachers make the best use of time in lessons to promote learning
 - ensuring teachers provide regular feedback to pupils in lessons and through marking and that pupils are able to respond in a way that promotes their learning
 - ensuring teachers provide pupils with more challenging and exciting work that maintains their interest so that pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning are always good.
- Ensure that pupils make at least good progress in reading, writing and in mathematics, so that they reach above average levels of attainment by the time they leave the school by:
 - improving pupils' understanding of letters and the sounds they make and older pupils' skills in understanding what they have read
 - making sure pupils' number skills are developed progressively
 - providing greater opportunities for pupils to practise their skills in extended pieces of writing
 - ensuring handwriting is taught regularly and pupils are encouraged to write and present their work neatly.
- Urgently improve the effectiveness of the leadership and management by:
 - ensuring that teaching and learning are checked more rigorously and that feedback to staff about how to improve their teaching and pupils' learning is clear and acted upon

- establishing links with successful schools in the area in order to improve the skills of leaders to drive improvement
- improving the tracking of pupils' progress so that the achievement of different groups of pupils can be identified more swiftly and the necessary support put in place to prevent them from falling behind
- making sure that leaders and governors fully understand what progress pupils are capable of and what constitutes good progress for pupils given their individual starting points
- improving the governing body's knowledge of the school's work, its strengths and weaknesses so that they can hold leaders to account for their performance.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 17 December 2014.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher and staff, two governors, a group of pupils from Key Stage 2 and a representative of the local authority. A telephone conversation was also held with a consultant headteacher working on behalf of the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle. Inspectors visited four lessons to observe teaching and speak to pupils informally about their learning. Alongside the headteacher, inspectors also scrutinised the current level of work in pupils' books. A wide range of documentation was evaluated, including the school's analysis of pupils' current attainment and progress and the most recent records of the checks made on the quality of teaching.

Context

Whitfield Primary formally joined the West Tyne Federation of schools, a group of three other Church of England schools in the locality, in July. As such, the acting headteacher is now the substantive executive headteacher of all four schools. The seconded senior teacher has been made substantive and continues to teach in the early years and Key Stage 1 class. Two teachers have joined the school from September, one on a full-time basis and the other to support English and mathematics teaching in the Key Stage 2 class during the mornings. The school will have a cohort of Year 6 pupils for the first time this year, completing its transition to primary school status.

The governing body has reconstituted as a result of the federation. There is now one governing body for all four schools. Four governors from Whitfield's governing body transferred to the federated governing body in July, although one has since resigned.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils' learning and progress in lessons remain slow across all phases of the school. Pupils are yet to make the swifter progress needed to ensure that they achieve at least what is expected nationally from their starting points. Leaders agree that the current standard of work in pupils' books and the observations of their learning in class show that they are not making up quickly enough for the significant ground they have lost in previous years. The long trend of underachievement has yet to be halted.

Unvalidated data for 2014 show that pupils' attainment at Key Stage 1 declined for the third year in a row, across all subjects, so that the gap between pupils within the school and their peers nationally widened further. Too few pupils reached the standard of work expected for their age; none achieved at the very highest levels, despite children arriving in the early years with skills and abilities that are above what is typical for their age. Achievement in reading is a particular concern. By the age of six, few pupils are able to recognise letters and the sounds they make to enable them to read and understand age-appropriate texts. As pupils move through the school, this hinders their learning across all other subjects.

School tracking systems do not give a clear picture of the current progress pupils are making, because leaders have yet to secure the accuracy of assessments. Leaders themselves do not have confidence that data being used as a baseline measure of progress represent a true picture of pupils' abilities, even when these have been moderated by the local authority. Securing the accuracy of assessment must be addressed urgently if leaders are to know if the actions they have put in place are making a discernible enough difference to pupils' achievement.

The quality of teaching

Although there are some early signs that teaching is beginning to strengthen, it has not improved rapidly enough because of fundamental weaknesses in the accuracy of assessment. Teachers themselves say that they are not completely confident that they know the exact starting points of those in their class. While an effort is being made to plan lessons that interest and engage pupils, this lack of clarity about where pupils are currently at in their learning prevents teachers from responding quickly to pupils' weaknesses and progress therefore remains slow.

The headteacher understands the urgency with which the quality of teaching needs to improve but infrequent and unfocused monitoring activities have prevented this

from becoming a reality. A number of developments have been actioned: a significant change to the way pupils are taught letters and sounds (phonics); a review of the way calculation skills are taught; and a renewed policy for how pupils' work should be marked. However, the success of these actions is highly variable. None is embedded sufficiently well to enable stronger, more rapid improvement.

Marking and feedback to pupils has shown some improvement. Teachers invest a lot of their time providing detailed comments in pupils' books so that strengths and ways forward are identified. However, the impact of this work is limited because there is no expectation that pupils will read their teachers' comments and respond in a meaningful way. As such, the benefits of providing more detailed marking and feedback to pupils are being wasted and this contributes to pupils' continued lack of progress.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils are keen and willing to learn, but these more positive attitudes to learning are not being capitalised upon by staff. While pupils are increasingly motivated to give of their best, in part through the more engaging contexts their teachers now create within lessons, they told inspectors that work was often 'too easy' or 'very confusing', confirming the difficulty teachers face in setting tasks that provide just the right level of challenge for pupils' abilities. When learning is not correctly pitched to address pupils' learning needs, pupils' concentration wanes and they find other less productive activities to occupy their time, such as taking off their shoes or chattering with their friends. Important learning time is lost during these periods, time that pupils cannot afford to lose.

Pupils learn and play together harmoniously. Inspectors observed no poor behaviour during their monitoring inspection and school records confirm that this is the norm. Attendance has slipped this term. While some of this can be attributed to a bout of sickness going around the school, school registers show that during the autumn term there has been only one week when all pupils in the Key Stage 2 class have been present. This compounds teachers' difficulties in enabling pupils to catch up.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leaders show a lack of urgency in addressing the weaknesses identified during both the February and May inspections. Fundamental issues regarding the accuracy of assessment, the tracking of pupils' progress and the rigorous checking of teachers' performance, which were identified nearly one year ago, remain unresolved. Crucially, while the federation with other schools has secured long-term leadership, it has meant only a quarter of the headteacher's time has been directed towards Whitfield Primary, the school in most need of attention. This lack of a regular leadership presence, together with weak oversight and the absence of essential systems and processes that are so urgently required, prevent the school from

making the reasonable progress needed to emerge from special measures in a timely fashion.

School improvement-planning still lacks the clarity, specificity and accountability mechanisms needed to prioritise actions and communicate a suitably high level of ambition to governors and staff. While the steering group frequently discusses the journey of the school towards the removal of special measures, using the local authority's own statement of action as the agenda, there is no overarching plan to drive improvement at school level.

The headteacher is too reliant on planned, one-off observations of classroom practice as a means of judging the quality of teaching. There is no programme of monitoring aligned to recent training, key changes to the curriculum or the school's most pressing priorities. The impact of recent actions is, therefore, unknown. Of the evidence that has been collected about teaching, most focuses too heavily on what the teacher is doing, rather than what pupils and different groups of pupils, are learning. There is no cross-referencing of information from lessons with the work in pupils' books to know if the effort shown by staff to change their practice is making a big enough difference to day-to-day teaching and pupils' overall achievement.

Governors are beginning to understand their roles and responsibilities in holding the school to account, but more needs to be done to ensure the newly federated governing body gels as a group and works as efficiently as needed. While governors have to carry out their statutory duties for all schools in the federation, more time needs to be devoted to their scrutiny of actions at Whitfield. They are still too reliant on the information provided by the headteacher and local authority and this is not always accurate. However, members are eager to do a better job, are keen to move forward on the recommendations of their external review and, as such, have accessed training, including a programme of coaching sessions, to 'learn on the job'. Awareness of school performance data, the expected standard of pupils' work and of the learning going on in classrooms have all increased, but the confidence of governors to carry out these activities without support has yet to develop fully.

External support

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the local authority has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose. The division of responsibilities between the local authority and the diocese has become clearer; the local authority is taking the lead and the work of the consultant headteacher from the diocese is coming to a close. An appropriate package of support has been planned.

The local authority officer is a regular presence within school, but has not identified that key systems remain ineffective. The monthly steering group meeting brings all the necessary people to the table, but lacks rigour in holding leaders to account because information they receive about progress is scant or incorrect. The planned

support from external partners, such as the Whitley Bay Teaching School or the Tyne Valley Teaching Alliance, while appropriately commissioned, has not afforded teachers the opportunity to observe the very best practice of colleagues elsewhere in order to share ideas and learn from established expertise. As with other improvement work within the school, the impact of this external support on pupils' achievement is unclear and too much teaching remains weak.