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Mrs Janet Conley
Headteacher
St Finbar's Catholic Primary School
South Hill Road
Liverpool
Merseyside
L8 9RY

Dear Mrs Conley

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Finbar's Catholic Primary School, Liverpool

Following my visit to your school on 12 January 2015, 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 September 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:

- continue to make use of the effective support being provided by the local authority, in partnership with the diocese, to ensure continuity in the management of the school
- consolidate the role of middle leaders to ensure that the improvements in teaching the full range of subjects are maintained
- identify and implement specific strategies to improve the quality of writing throughout the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with yourself and the acting deputy headteacher, as well as with representatives of the local authority and the diocese. In addition, discussions were held with a small group of parents, three governors including the Chair of the Governing Body, as well as a group of pupils from Year 6. At these meetings I discussed the actions taken since the last inspection, the progress being made and the level of support being provided. A range of documentation, which you provided including attendance data and monitoring information, were also evaluated. Written evidence from a number of parents who could not attend the discussion with parents was also considered. In addition, a learning walk with you and the acting deputy headteacher focussed on the learning environment around the school as well as the behaviour and engagement of pupils in lessons.

Context

Overall, the turbulence in staffing has now been resolved. The substantive headteacher is currently on a phased return following a long period of absence. Unfortunately, this has coincided with the deputy headteacher also being absent, possibly for the rest of this term. To safeguard the improvements being made, the local authority has drafted in support from the headteacher of Kingsley Community School, who is a National Leader in Education. This arrangement, for this term, guarantees that there is always an experienced senior leader on site and ensures continuity in management. A newly qualified teacher started in Year 3 at the beginning of term and a long term temporary teacher has been employed to enable the acting deputy headteacher to fulfil her new management role. The governing body is due to be re-constituted later this term with a re-alignment of responsibilities planned. A review of how pupil premium funding is being spent is due to be completed at the beginning of February. The teaching timetable has been reviewed to better meet the needs of the new national curriculum and subjects are now being taught discretely.

Main findings

The action plan is succinct and addresses the key issues for improvement. Actions are appropriate and clearly aimed at improving provision in the classroom. There are many practical actions which are aimed at having an immediate impact. This was clearly evidenced in the work seen in pupils' books and in their engagement in lessons during our learning walk around the school. There is a clear timeline for each action and the person(s) responsible is/are clearly identified. Several improvements are already in place. For example, the appraisal of teacher performance is now clearly linked to improvements in outcomes for pupils and to specific responsibilities.

The management of subjects, other than English and mathematics, is also improving and the positive impact is clearly seen in pupils' work and celebrated in the displays

around the school. All subject leaders have very specific action plans which focus on developing teachers' subject knowledge and increasing their confidence in teaching the full range of subjects. Monitoring of teaching and learning is more robust than previously, with subject leaders increasingly involved alongside senior management.

Standards have improved and weaknesses in mathematics are being addressed through improved teaching as well as focussed catch-up sessions. Pupils' work across a wide range of subjects is improving. Parents are very positive about the progress that their children are now making. Among the many positive comments one parent wrote 'I could not believe the amount of written work in books when I attended parents evening and was really overwhelmed at what my little girl can do when she is challenged and interested'. Subjects are now taught discretely and there is a clear focus on specific knowledge and skills. Pupils interviewed identified that they enjoy this rather than topic work and they felt that they 'understood the subjects better'. It was a pleasure to observe Year 5 pupils discussing, in a history lesson, the advantages and disadvantages of living in Athens or Sparta. They were aware that Sparta was a monarchy and Athens a democracy. They were able to justify their preference for Sparta by identifying that Athens was a democracy for only a small number of citizens, with most inhabitants being slaves. Equally, they were aware that it was not a true democracy since women were not allowed to vote. We also observed pupils using dictionaries to identify the correct meaning of democracy. Writing remains an area where pupils, and boys in particular, make least progress across the school. However, there is evidence emerging to suggest that work in subjects such as history, geography and science etc is beginning to improve writing skills.

Pupils who were interviewed were wholly positive about the improvements that have been made and the difference it is making to their enjoyment of learning. 'It used to be boring but now we like coming in (to school) to learn' was a consensus during our discussion. Attendance is much improved and is in line with the national average. Behaviour around the school and in lessons is much better and the atmosphere around the school is quiet, orderly and purposeful. The number of incidents related to poor behaviour is now extremely low. Pupils are particularly impressed with the range of new lunchtime activities and resources which keep them engaged. They felt that this is also having a very positive impact on behaviour. Pupils were adamant that the school is improving and that they are now enjoying their lessons much more across the full range of subjects.

During the learning walk with yourself and your acting deputy, we focussed on the learning environment and the extent to which pupils were involved in their learning. Again a very positive picture is beginning to emerge. In the Reception class, outdoor provision has been transformed and is now more conducive to constructive play and learning. Pupils are attentive and actively engaged in their learning. This positive pattern was repeated in every class visited. Even in Year 2, where pupils previously had found it difficult to sit still and concentrate, they were engaged and listening attentively to the teacher. Displays in classrooms and around the school reflect the

high quality work being produced across the full range of subjects. For example, the main hall had a colourful history timeline celebrating the work done in every class in the school. Vocabulary is actively displayed and word walls are in use in every classroom. All pupils have easy access to dictionaries and thesauruses to help improve their writing and vocabulary. Pupils informed me that these were regularly used.

Governors play an active role in monitoring progress and holding senior leaders to account. They continue to provide good support. They are committed to, and aware of, the need to maintain stability in staffing if progress is to continue to be made. Governance is due to be re-constituted shortly and responsibilities are to be re-organised to ensure that all aspects of school life and management are covered. The governors are aware that improvements are still fragile but with stable staffing now in place there is clear evidence of progress. They are well placed to evaluate the work of the school.

A sense of community has returned to St Finbar's and there is a strong belief that the school is improving day-to-day. This feeling is endorsed by parents one of whom stated 'I'm really happy with the school. My child is doing brilliantly and I'm a happy mummy with no complaints'. There is now a real desire to embrace change, continue to improve and finish what has been started.

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 school has received, and continues to receive, very good support from the local authority in partnership with the diocese. Help and training has been provided for school managers to ensure duties, such as the monitoring of provision and teaching and learning, are now, more secure and rigorous. Support has been brokered from a national leader in education for you to enable a seamless transition between previous and current management. Support to develop subject expertise is on-going and is beginning to show impact. Subject leaders participate regularly in network meetings where issues are discussed and good practice is shared. Ongoing monitoring by local authority officers is rigorous and supportive.

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

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow

Her Majesty's Inspector