

30 January 2015

Mrs Verna Marsh
Headteacher
St James CofE Primary School, Ashton-under-Lyne
Romney Street
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Dear Mrs Marsh

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St James CofE Primary School, Ashton-under-Lyne, Tameside

Following my visit to your school on 29 January 2015, 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 third 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:

- ensure that senior and middle leaders observations' of classroom practice provide a clearer picture of what teaching is typically like in the school, by making sure all lesson observations are unannounced
- make sure that attainment and progress data are carefully analysed; so that senior leaders and governors are able to evaluate how well the different groups of pupils in the school are doing
- ensure that the marking of pupils' work is of consistently high quality, with teachers making sure that pupils follow up the advice they receive to improve their work and so accelerate their progress
- make sure that when homework is set for pupils, they hand it in by the agreed deadline, demonstrating to pupils that homework is a valuable part of their education.

Evidence

During this visit I met with you and the deputy headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the local authority. I also held meetings with a representative of the Church of England Diocese of Manchester, the members of staff with leadership responsibility for literacy and numeracy and a group of Key Stage 2 pupils. I also observed two part lessons and scrutinised the work in a sample of books, from pupils in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. As this was the third monitoring visit my focus was to determine the progress you and your colleagues are making against each of the areas for improvement identified in the most recent inspection report and which form the focus of the school's development plan.

Context

Since my previous visit three teachers on temporary contracts have left the school and three teachers joined the staff at the start of this term. Senior leaders have been supported in their work to improve the school by a National Leader of Education of a successful school in a neighbouring local authority, an education adviser from the Church of England Diocese of Manchester and an independent consultant from the 'Everyone Learning Alliance', who has been supporting curriculum developments in mathematics. The Everyone Learning Alliance is a group of schools that work together to share good practice, with the expressed aim of making schools better places for young people to learn. The school has also continued to receive the comprehensive support of an adviser from Tameside's school improvement service.

Main findings

You and your colleagues have introduced greater rigour to monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers are regularly observed at work in their classrooms by either a senior or subject leader. Allied to these lesson observations senior and subject leaders scrutinise the work in pupils' books, to determine pupils' learning over time and the quality of teachers' marking. Taken together, these activities are enabling senior leaders to identify where the most effective classroom practice is in the school and those aspects of teachers' work that require further development. This information is then shared, as appropriate, with each teacher and their areas for development followed up at subsequent observations. As a consequence, senior leaders are able to evaluate the impact of the support individual teachers have received to improve their professional practice. You have been supported in this aspect of your work, by the national leader of education and external consultant, who have jointly observed lessons with you and your colleagues to assure your judgements.

Senior leaders' monitoring records show that they have taken decisive action when teaching has been below their high expectations consequently, this indicates an improving trend in the quality of teaching and learning over recent months. However, not all lesson observations are unannounced and senior leaders sometimes give teachers notice of when they will be observed. Under these circumstances teachers have time to prepare for their observation and as a result senior leaders cannot be sure that the lesson they observe is typical of the quality of teaching over time.

Senior leaders, with the support of the local authority adviser, have engaged the services of an experienced teacher to cover a temporary vacancy in the Early Years and Foundation Stage. The newly appointed teacher has been tasked with driving forward improvements in the quality of teaching and accelerating children's progress. However, it is too early to assess the impact this change in personnel is having on outcomes.

You recognise that children enter the Nursery Year with under developed communication skills. With colleagues from the Diocese and two other schools, you have been successful in securing funding from the Archbishop of Canterbury's 'Unlocking Gifts' programme to appoint a specialist speech and language therapist. This member of staff will work across the three schools with those children whose communication skills are weak. The intention being to accelerate these children's progress in this area and contribute to their preparation and readiness for Key Stage 1. This is a relatively new initiative and it is too early to assess its impact at St James'.

With the guidance of an external consultant, senior leaders are developing a new approach to the teaching of mathematics across the school; in order to meet the requirements of the new National Curriculum. This offers a structure for the teaching of the subject, which you and your colleagues feel provides a consistent approach to the development of mathematical ideas. However, this is a recent development and there has been too little time for it to have impacted, sufficiently, on pupils' outcomes.

In order to assure the reliability of teachers' assessments of pupils' attainment and progress in mathematics and reading, you have purchased two commercially available schemes, one for each subject. Both schemes are enabling senior leaders to measure pupils' progress against the requirements of the new National Curriculum. Using information from these schemes, alongside other checks of teachers' assessments, senior leaders have confidence in the accuracy of the data on pupils' performance. As a consequence, senior leaders can identify, quickly, those pupils who are under achieving and put in place extra help to get them back on track.

Senior leaders' current data are showing an improving picture, in terms of attainment and progress, in the core subjects at Key Stage 1 and in writing and mathematics at Key Stage 2, when compared to a similar period last year. Although these data support senior leaders' views that the quality of teaching is improving, this conclusion needs to be treated with caution. The reason for this is that the data have not been sufficiently well analysed to determine the attainment and progress of groups, for example girls, boys, disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

My scrutiny of a sample of pupils' books indicates that they value and take pride in their work. This is reflected in work that is neatly presented and up-to-date. Teachers' marking is regular, but inconsistent. For example, in the Year 6 literacy books I examined there were examples of pupils not responding to their teacher's previous comments and so learning from them.

The pupils I spoke with said they enjoy the many sporting activities that are available to them, both during the school day and after school. In particular, the after school activities that increase their opportunities to participate in competitive sport, meet pupils from other schools and, consequently, broaden their horizons. Pupils commented that the school's approach to the teaching of mathematics is presenting them with greater challenge, making them think hard and as a result helping their understanding. They felt that the setting and collecting in of homework was inconsistent, some pupils being allowed to miss deadlines. Consequently, the conscientious pupils felt that their homework was not valued. When asked about bullying pupils told me that it was not a problem at St. James'; however on those occasions when bullying did occur their teachers dealt with it but pupils said they would like to have had greater involvement in determining the resolution.

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 and diocese recognise that senior leaders have required additional help to address each of the areas of improvement in the previous inspection report and continued to provide effective and regular support, particularly in relation to improving the quality of teaching and learning. External consultants have also provided timely and valuable assistance to senior leaders in their drive to make improvements in the literacy and mathematics curriculum.

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

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector