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Vicky Rezaie
Executive headteacher
Waltham Holy Cross Junior School
Quendon Drive
Waltham Abbey
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Dear Mrs Rezaie

Special measures monitoring inspection of Waltham Holy Cross Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 4–5 March 2015, 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 third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in January 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 making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

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 and the Director of Children's Services for Essex.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Winter
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection, which took place in January 2014

- Improve teaching so that it is at least good by ensuring that all teachers:
 - learn from the good and outstanding teaching which exists in the school and take steps to improve their own practice
 - develop their questioning skills to probe pupils' understanding more effectively and deepen pupils' knowledge and thinking
 - develop the quality of their exposition in mathematics and English lessons, and model more effectively the skills that they are teaching
 - develop the marking system so that it is consistently used in all classes
 - adopt a programme for the consistent teaching of spelling across the school.

- Accelerate the rates of pupils' progress in all classes so that standards rise to the levels of which pupils are capable by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what pupils can and should achieve
 - giving pupils of different abilities tasks which challenge them, and allowing them enough time to practise what they have been taught
 - giving pupils opportunities to use their mathematical skills in real-life situations
 - developing pupils' ability to write at length and to improve their understanding of grammar, punctuation and spelling.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - leaders at all levels accurately identify the most important actions that are needed to bring about improvements in teaching, and that they make sure the improvements are happening
 - the headteacher tackles poor leadership swiftly and holds leaders to account for pupils' progress
 - subject leaders develop the skills to support teachers to improve and are given the time to do so
 - weak teaching is challenged and that teachers know exactly what needs to improve, within short timescales
 - the newly re-constituted governing body receives appropriate training and help from the local authority to implement the recommendations from the recent external review of governance, so that it challenges and supports the work of the school effectively.

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

Report on the third monitoring inspection on insert date of inspection

Evidence

The inspector observed teaching and learning in seven lessons. Three of the observations were conducted jointly with the executive headteacher. The inspector met with the executive headteacher and other leaders, including the deputy headteacher, the leader for special educational needs and the leaders of English and mathematics. Meetings were also held with the Chair of the Governing Body, the Chair of the Strategic Intervention Board, and a representative from the local authority. The inspector met with a group of pupils and spoke to pupils in lessons. The inspector scrutinised documents, achievement data and school improvement plans.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, four teachers have left the school, including the leaders of mathematics and English. They have been replaced by teachers on fixed-term contracts until the end of the Summer term. Two of the new teachers have joined the school as acting assistant headteachers and they have taken on the leadership of mathematics and English. Lilac Sky Schools continue to provide leadership of the school through the executive headteacher who will leave the school in April 2015. The headteacher of Waltham Holy Cross Infant School will become the executive headteacher in April and continue to lead both schools until the school closes and the infant school extends to a primary school at the beginning of September 2015.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Achievement has improved, particularly in Years 3 and 4, where staffing has been more stable and the quality of teaching has improved over time.

Pupils continue to have more opportunities to develop their writing skills. Regular writing workshops and focused short writing tasks are helpful in building pupils' writing stamina and developing their skills. Leaders have set minimum expectations to ensure that pupils complete written work three times a week in their English lessons. There is a greater focus now on improving spelling, grammar and punctuation and this is paying dividends, particularly in Years 3 and 4. Pupils' handwriting and presentation of work has improved in some classes but not universally.

Pupils' skills in mathematics are improving because teachers have received training to ensure that basic number skills are taught effectively. The most-able pupils have regular opportunities to apply their improving number skills to more complex calculations and problems. Other pupils have less regular opportunities to do this in their lessons, and this hinders better progress. Attainment in reading is improving.

Pupils are developing a joy in reading. The new library makes a good contribution to pupils' love of books.

Older pupils in Years 5 and 6 have significant gaps in their learning because of weak teaching in the past. Leaders are addressing this by allocating greater resources to upper Key Stage 2. Additional teachers work in these year groups and pupils are split into smaller teaching groups so that teachers can address their needs more successfully. Some of this work is at an early stage, however better progress is emerging, particularly for those pupils who have fallen behind. The school has set ambitious targets for Year 6 pupils to ensure that they leave the school with the skills and knowledge they need for secondary education. The school's own tracking indicates that the attainment of Year 6 pupils will be close to average at the end of the year but progress from their starting points is below average and too few pupils are making better than expected progress.

Gaps in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils in the school have narrowed, apart from in Year 5 where the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in writing lags behind other pupils.

Progress in science, history, geography and religious education is too slow, particularly in Years 5 and 6, because these subjects are not taught regularly enough or well enough.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has improved in classes where the school has had time to train teachers and develop their skills. The coaching and training programme has been effective in developing teachers' skills and knowledge. Classes in Years 5 and 6 have a high proportion of new and temporary teachers. These new teachers are taking time to adapt to the school's expectations of lessons. Senior leaders are providing training and support to ensure that the school's teaching policies and procedures are followed by all staff. New teachers in Year 6 have worked quickly to identify the gaps in learning, particularly in mathematics and in spelling. They plan lessons to address these gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding.

Teachers' marking is now more consistently helpful in showing pupils how to improve their work. Teachers use learning targets in lessons to show pupils how they can be successful. Their expectations of pupils differ according to their skills and understanding. This is helpful in ensuring that work is set at the right level. However, in some classes this approach is still developing and some expectations of learning do not challenge the most-able pupils.

The accuracy of teachers' assessments of pupils in reading, writing and mathematics has improved in Years 3 and 4. However, in the other year groups some teachers' assessments are not fully secure. Leaders are aware of this and have provided further training to address the issue.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils are generally more engaged in lessons and attitudes to learning are more positive, particularly among younger pupils. However, when pupils are not fully involved in their lessons, they fidget, chat and do not listen well. This low-level disruption hinders progress for a minority of pupils and older pupils report that it is common in their lessons.

Most pupils behave well around the school, in the playground and in the dining room. They listen respectfully to each other in assemblies. The school's incident records indicate that behaviour is improving. Bullying is rare. However, pupils say that there is some inconsistency in how teachers deal with the poor behaviour of a small minority of pupils and they do not have confidence that all teachers deal with it effectively. At the time of the last monitoring inspection, pupils had a poor understanding of what constitutes homophobic bullying. This lack of understanding persists and pupils report that the word 'gay' is used regularly in a derogatory way.

The school's safeguarding and child protection procedures meet requirements.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The executive headteacher continues to lead the school skilfully despite significant staff turnover. The school has been unable to recruit permanent teachers to replace those that have left the school, due to the forthcoming closure of the school when Holy Cross Infant School extends its age range to accommodate Key Stage 2 pupils. However, the staffing structure for the new primary school has now been agreed and governors are currently recruiting staff for September 2015.

The appointment of the deputy headteacher, who previously worked in the infant school, has secured greater leadership capacity. She is also teaching groups of pupils in Year 6 to secure better progress for those that have fallen behind. Leaders of English and mathematics are new to their roles but are beginning to plan improvements.

Leaders now track the progress of disadvantaged pupils, disabled pupils and those with special educational needs more carefully. Additional support for disadvantaged pupils is effective in helping them to make better progress and close the gaps in attainment. The support that disabled pupils and those with special educational needs receive has secured better progress in reading but is not wholly successful in addressing pupils' needs in writing and mathematics.

The curriculum is too narrow for some pupils, particularly those in some of the Year 5 and 6 classes. Pupils enjoy the art lessons they have, taught by a teacher from the infant school. They have produced some impressive artwork, which is displayed around the school. However, these lessons, along with lessons to develop knowledge and skills in geography and religious education, are too infrequent.

The strategic intervention board is overseeing the school. It monitors and challenges the work of the school effectively in regular meetings. The Chair of the Strategic Intervention Board is helping to develop the skills of governors by guiding them in asking probing questions of school leaders. The board is proactive in requesting the information it needs to monitor the school's progress rigorously. The school's self-evaluation is accurate and detailed. Improvement plans are reviewed and adapted as priorities change.

External support

The support of the local authority is brokered through the leadership provided by the executive headteacher from Lilac Sky Schools. The local authority monitors the school's work through the strategic intervention board and regular reviews of teaching and learning.