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6 March 2015

Mrs Cathy Lord
Headteacher
Victoria Primary School
Victoria Road
Northwich
Cheshire
CW9 5RE

Dear Mrs Lord

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Victoria Road Primary School, Cheshire West and Chester

Following my visit to your school on 5 March 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. 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 December 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 not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection. The school should take immediate action to:

- review the current strategies for improving teaching and ensure all leaders have an accurate view of teaching day-in and day-out in all classes by:
 - making sure everyone knows what good teaching and learning looks like and ensuring this benchmark is used to raise the expectations of leaders and teachers
 - ensuring all checks on teaching look beyond compliance with school policies and get to grips with the weaknesses in teaching so training can be matched more precisely to individual needs
 - providing teachers with crystal clear feedback so they know exactly what they need to do to improve
 - review the published schemes and strategies to ensure they are being adapted to pupils' needs and allow pupils to flourish as writers and mathematicians

- strengthen the action plan so it becomes a useful route map for everyone by:
 - identifying the long term actions so everyone knows where they are heading
 - including markers along the way so leaders and governors can keep a closer eye on progress
 - ensuring the role of the governing body in the improvement journey is explicit

- organise an external review of pupil premium funding to help disadvantaged pupils make greater gains in their learning.

Evidence

During my visit, meetings were held with you, the assistant headteacher and the subject leaders for mathematics and English. I also met four members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority. I chatted to a small group of older pupils to gather their views about the school's progress. I evaluated your school improvement plan and took account of your most recent data on pupils' achievement. I also looked at records of your checks on teaching. We visited each classroom to talk to pupils, observe them at work and to look at their books.

Context

Since the December inspection, the Year 1 teacher has left. The part-time teacher in Year 4 is working full time in Year 1 for the foreseeable future. A temporary teacher is covering the part-time vacancy in Year 4.

Main findings

You are not facing any major resistance to change. Everyone accepts the inspection judgement is accurate and all are keen to do their bit to bring about improvement. No-one has stood still since the inspectors left your school. Despite everyone being very busy, your actions are not tackling weaknesses quickly enough to ensure the school is on a steady course to recovery.

Your progress is faltering because your work to improve teaching is not getting to the heart of the matter. You and your senior leaders do not have a realistic view of the teaching that typically takes place day-in and day-out across the school. Your judgements are too generous and are not backed up by the work in pupils' books.

You are not setting your sights high enough because there is no shared understanding of what good teaching and learning looks like. Not enough attention is being given to improving teachers' skills. Although you check teaching frequently, this is not making a difference. There is too much focus on ensuring teachers are following agreed policies rather than looking closely at the gains different groups of pupils are making in their learning. No-one is getting below the surface in their checks to find out exactly what teachers need to do to lift their game. As a result,

teachers are not crystal clear about their next steps and training is not tailored closely enough to their individual needs.

There is too much reliance on using published schemes as a solution to improving teaching. In the short-term these new strategies are helping to secure a whole-school approach to teaching English and mathematics. However, these schemes are being followed slavishly because not all teachers have the confidence or skills to adapt the published materials to meet the needs of the pupils in their class. This is not helping pupils make up for lost ground so they can successfully reach the standards expected for their age.

Your own data points to an improving picture in terms of pupils' achievement in writing; this is less convincing in mathematics. More Year 6 pupils are on track to make the progress they should by the time they leave the school than has been the case in the past. Nonetheless, there is still a considerable mountain to climb to ensure all pupils are ready for the next stage of their education. This is particularly true for disadvantaged pupils who are not catching up quickly enough. Pupils' books confirm too much variation in achievement across the school. Many pupils are lagging behind by a considerable distance because of wide gaps in their basic skills. Some teachers do not expect enough from pupils. This means the quality and quantity of work in pupils' books is not hitting the mark. An overuse of worksheets gets in the way of some pupils using their skills to write at length and to solve open-ended mathematical problems. Some teachers are too glowing in their feedback, over-praising work which is not good enough for pupils' age or ability. Some books are poorly presented which hints at a lack of pride and enthusiasm for learning.

There is no doubt you are taking the findings raised in the December inspection seriously. Your action plan shows you know what needs to happen to tackle weaknesses. You are very clear about the path that must be followed to bring about success. However, your plan is not helping everyone else understand the route they will be taking to bring about improvement. This is because the plan is too short term; it does not allow staff and governors to understand where they are heading beyond the next few months. There are no markers along the way to keep an eye on progress and the governing body have no voice in your planned actions.

Despite these shortcomings, there are signs of success elsewhere. Teachers are fully behind you and are following your lead without exception. They are striving to put new ways of working into place so there are common approaches to teaching mathematics and English. Everyone is following suit and marking pupils' work in line with your renewed guidance. Your work to build the skills of other leaders is beginning to reap rewards. This means you are not shouldering an excess load in driving improvement. No-one is allowing new ways of working to damage the key strengths that make Victoria Road a happy and special place for the pupils that attend. Positive relationships, a shared desire to improve and essential systems for checking teaching and pupils' achievement are all in place. The foundations have been laid. My findings show it is not a question of starting from scratch, but an opportunity to take stock and reshape your planned actions so that improving teaching becomes your core business.

Pupils are full of praise for the changes you are bringing. They value the energy teachers put into making learning fun and they appreciate the feedback they receive on their work. Pupils think behaviour is typically good; but not perfect. They have issues with the current behaviour system which they believe lets some pupils get away with low-level disruption in class too easily.

You have the support and confidence of a governing body who share your desire to improve the school. Governors have an appetite for change; they are willing to accept challenge and readily seek, and act upon, advice and guidance to help them improve their own effectiveness. They are well-equipped to help you in the next stage of your journey. Governors give their time generously, visiting school frequently to find out for themselves how well you are faring. They have an honest and accurate view of the school. They do not accept or make excuses; they know progress has not been swift enough. As a result, they are streamlining their committee structure to enable them to keep a closer eye on the success of all leaders in improving teaching and raising pupils' achievement.

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 is increasing the nature and level of support to the school following the recent inspection. You and your leaders are welcoming this increased level of support and scrutiny. You are keen to gain as much as possible from this partnership to steer a course towards improvement. However, much of this work is still in its infancy. Early indications show the work of local authority consultants is beginning to build the confidence and skills of subject leaders. You are also benefitting from the support of a local authority officer which is helping to review and plan your actions for the coming months.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Cheshire West and Chester.

Yours sincerely

Joanne Olsson
Her Majesty's Inspector