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Ms Dawn Rapson
Headteacher
Birchwood CofE Primary School
The Mount
Admirals Road
Birchwood
Warrington
Cheshire
WA3 6QG

Dear Ms Rapson

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Birchwood CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 25 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 was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in January 2014. 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 the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Warrington.

Yours sincerely

Eileen Mulgrew

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Ensure teaching is consistently good or better so that all groups of pupils make at least good progress and their attainment rises in reading, writing and mathematics at Key Stage 1 and 2 by:
 - ensuring all teaching is well-paced and captures pupils' interests and encourages them to learn, particularly the most able
 - ensuring marking improves, and best practice is shared and consistent across all subjects, especially in science and history
 - developing pupils' ability to assess the quality of their own work and to be aware what they need to do in order to take the next steps in their learning.

- Raise the achievement of all pupils in Years 1 to 6, in reading, writing and mathematics so that more attain higher standards at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 by:
 - ensuring that there are no significant differences between the performance of pupils from different groups, including boys and girls and that lessons are of interest to both
 - ensuring that pupils have more opportunities to read, write and use mathematical skills in other subjects
 - providing pupils with a variety of opportunities to use and apply their mathematical skills to solve practical, day-to-day problems.

- Improve the impact of leadership, management and governance by:
 - ensuring that governors and the senior leadership team continually evaluate the effectiveness of the school's main action plan
 - developing the expertise of subject and key stage leaders in checking the quality of teaching and pupils' progress
 - ensuring that all adults consistently apply school policies and are insistent that pupils demonstrate the highest possible standards of behaviour, particularly in the classroom.

An external review of governance should be undertaken, to include a specific focus on the school's use of the pupil premium, in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 25 March 2015.

Evidence

I met with you, the deputy headteacher, the local authority senior adviser, the Chair of the Governing Body and four other governors, the teacher responsible for pupils with special educational needs (SENCO), the early years leader, and a group of subject leaders. I met with the office manager to discuss the single central record and found this to meet requirements. I visited most classes, accompanied by you, to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning across the school. We reviewed a range of pupils' books to check progress, presentation, marking and handwriting. I looked at your review of the progress of the school, minutes from meetings of the governing body and pupil progress information.

Context

Since my last inspection a teaching assistant and two midday assistants have joined the school staff. A new member has joined the governing body and another member is being recruited.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

You have established a cohesive group of professionals who are committed to providing the best possible education for the pupils at Birchwood and prepare them well for the future. Morale is high; staff talk confidently about the support they receive so they can reach the high expectations that you have set. Governors are resolute in their determination to provide for the pupils, making every minute count. After each meeting governors ask, 'What impact has this meeting had on the pupils of this school?' and so never forget their key responsibility. Parents are more confident in the school with increased numbers attending meetings and workshops. Pupils are proud of their school and want to work hard. Through sharing out leadership responsibilities you have brought fresh ideas to the team. Members are working well together to check systematically on the progress of the school. This means you have confident and competent leaders willing and able to perform their duties as the school improves its performance.

The SENCO contributes very effectively to the improvements made in the school. By the introduction of new systems he makes sure that teachers are held accountable for the progress of this group of pupils in each class. Extra programmes to help pupils with special educational needs are more tailored to their needs. Teaching assistants are matched to pupils based on the pupil's individual need and also on the particular skill of the teaching assistant, so the best learning can take place. Similarly, although only recently appointed to the leadership of the early years, this leader has worked swiftly to evaluate the effectiveness of this stage. She is using

children's progress information to review the provision in the Nursery and Reception classes.

You have a clear picture of the strengths of teaching within the school and the areas that need improvement. This is because you and senior leaders observe teaching in classes, talk to pupils, look at pupils' workbooks and check pupils' progress information. Additionally, you visit classrooms frequently and work alongside teachers to model good practice so that teachers can see how to improve. You have secured a mutually beneficial approach to improving teaching by using the skills of all teachers. Through this tactic you have stimulated professional discussion as staff share ideas and talk about their practice. It means that all staff feel valued as they have a strength they can share. Targets set for improvement are accompanied by support and you expect to see this aspect improved by your next classroom observation. There is no uncertainty among teachers about their role in the improvement of the school. Systems to link teachers' annual targets to the quality of their teaching and the improvement of the achievement of the pupils they teach are now well established.

Middle leaders are developing their roles well; although some are at an earlier stage than others. All middle leaders have a clear understanding of their contribution to school improvement. You have worked with them to make sure they know how to carry out their role through, for example, jointly observing lessons, book scrutinies and moderation of writing. Leaders of mathematics and English have led professional training in for example, reasoning and problem-solving, visual literacy and vocabulary building, and phonics (the sounds that letters make). Teachers have successfully improved their own handwriting and provide good role models for this aspect. As a result, pupils' skills in reasoning and handwriting have improved. Additionally, pupils are using more creative vocabulary in their work and the Year 1 phonics check is set to rise significantly this year. During my visit children in Reception were busily writing sentences about a photograph of themselves using the 'I think', 'I say', 'I write' technique.

Through the regular meetings of the school effectiveness committee, governors are very effective in checking on the improvements in the school, especially those linked to the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement. Governors ask probing questions and challenge you to make sure all decisions are based on providing the best for the pupils. Several subject leaders have presented information to the governing body. Individual governors are linked to subjects or aspects. Consequently, governors know the school well.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Governance is strong and members know the school well, providing support and challenge in equal measure so that leaders know they will be answerable for any decisions taken.

- Established senior leaders have enhanced their skills so that they can support you in checking on the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement. Newly appointed leaders have brought fresh eyes to the systems and processes in school and have made some effective changes to support pupils' swifter progress.
- Teachers have responded well to professional training. They are sharing ideas and planning learning which interests pupils. They have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve. Pupils have responded well; they want to work hard and learn. Walking around the school I observed pupils, including children in Reception, concentrating and working together to talk about their work.
- School records show that pupils' achievement in Year 2 assessments in reading, writing and mathematics is set to rise this year at the expected and the higher levels. Pupils in Year 6 are making much better progress.
- Gaps in attainment between pupils who are disadvantaged and other pupils are narrowing.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- A few teachers do not have the subject knowledge in mathematics to enable them to challenge pupils' reasoning skills.
- You have recognised that the progress made by pupils who have special educational needs is generally lagging behind that of other pupils.
- Although marking has improved it is important that, as a school, you decide what pupils need to know to improve further and take action to support pupils to succeed.
- Attendance rates have slipped recently. However, you take action to find out the reason for absences and support parents to help their children to attend more regularly.
- There are still opportunities for pupils to use their reading, writing and mathematics skills across other subjects.

External support

As senior leaders have enhanced their skills and systems for checking the performance of the school have strengthened, the local authority (LA) has maintained a 'light touch' approach to supporting the school. The LA senior leader challenges the decisions of the headteacher and governors through her attendance at governing body meetings. Visits to the school have included learning walks, visit to the early years and discussions with the headteacher. The headteacher has taken advantage of the strategy for 'school to school' support stimulated by the LA. She uses her extensive network to strengthen teachers' classroom skills and provision for pupils. For example, the school is involved in the Hope Challenge; this involves Hope University trainee teachers working with specific groups of pupils to improve their mathematics skills.