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28 April 2015

Joanne Reed
Headteacher
Rowans Primary School
Rowans
Welwyn Garden City
AL7 1NZ

Dear Ms Reed

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Rowans Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 27 April 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 February 2015. 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 enhance its improvement plan by ensuring that:

- all success criteria are precise and measurable
- links between actions, success criteria and monitoring activity are clear
- monitoring activity is sufficiently sharply-focused to allow the school's leaders to check that actions have been carried out successfully and to allow governors to hold school leaders fully to account
- all issues are addressed in a timely fashion.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher and three members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I spoke to a representative of the local authority on the telephone and you took me on a tour of the school. The school improvement plan was evaluated.

Context

Since the last inspection, the nursery teacher has left the school and the deputy headteacher is now teaching the Nursery class. A supply teacher is covering the long-term absence of another member of staff. A new outdoor classroom has been created for Year 1 and the two intervention rooms have been refurbished.

Main findings

You were not surprised by the result of the recent inspection and neither were governors. You have responded quickly to the key actions given to you by the inspection team and it is clear that the school is beginning to move forward. You are realistic and accurate in your assessment of how far the school has progressed and how far there is left to travel for the school to be judged good at its next inspection.

You adapted the school improvement plan to include all the key actions from the recent inspection and you extended the plan to cover the next three terms. You have sensibly linked the plan to the school's budget and have included costings wherever possible. The plan states that staff appraisal targets are linked to the improvement plan's targets. This is an important step in ensuring a 'joined up' approach to school improvement.

The school improvement plan is clearly a working document. The annotation on the master copy shows that the plan is checked and updated frequently. The plan includes a range of suitable actions and identifies individual members of staff with responsibility for each action. The plan includes success criteria and monitoring activity. A list of outcomes for each priority show the milestones that you intend the school to reach at intervals over the coming year.

However, the monitoring activity in the plan is not clear enough. Similarly, success criteria are not always 'smart' enough and are sometimes difficult to measure or are open to interpretation. For example, 'SLT more able to use data to inform next steps' requires a subjective weighing up of information rather than a clear-cut judgement on success. It is not always clear how actions, success criteria and monitoring activity link together. The timescale for improving the early year's outdoor space is too long and the expectations for raising attendance are not high enough.

Governors are committed to the school, keen for it to improve and are highly reflective. They are well aware of their shortcomings as a group and understand that they did not monitor the school as closely as they should have done for a period of time. Governors have responded very well to the 'pre-meetings' that you now provide for them. These tutoring sessions mean that governors are now better informed and more able to ask challenging questions in meetings. Governors have completed self-assessment questionnaires and a full review of governance is due to take place next week.

You have taken appropriate action in a number of areas and you are beginning to see the results of them. For example, you told me how recent staff training on the use of assessment data has resulted in staff having higher expectations of what pupils can and should achieve. A more rigorous approach to monitoring and improving attendance has resulted in the school's overall attendance figure rising from 93.9% at the end of the autumn term to 94.6% at the end of the spring term.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The local authority supports the school well and you told me how much you value the improvement partner's visits. The improvement partner strikes an appropriate balance between challenge and support. She visits frequently and has a good understanding of the school's needs and its current position. You told me that the advisory teachers provided by the local authority are particularly helpful and it is clear that they are having a strong impact on helping the school to improve.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire County Council.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Varney
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc. Appropriate authority - Chair of the Governing Body/Interim Executive Board
cc. Local authority