

29 April 2015

Mrs Shelagh O'Keeffe (Acting Headteacher)
St Marie's Catholic Primary School
Bigdale Drive
Kirkby
Merseyside
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Dear Mrs O'Keeffe

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Marie's Catholic Primary School, Knowsley

Following my visit to your school on 28 April 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 April 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governor are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action as below:

- the acting headteacher and governors to provide practical support for teachers to improve their skills and knowledge in mathematics, subject leadership, and resources
- governors to ensure that they are given detailed plans and reports about how each strand of the pupil premium is spent, with targets for children and impact of actions
- the learning mentor for attendance to have regular meetings about pupils who are persistently absent with the acting headteacher, now responsible for safeguarding
- the co-ordinator for English to identify pupils most in need of improving hand-writing, to put in place targeted programmes and monitor progress regularly
- teachers to brief teaching assistants about medium term curriculum plans
- senior leaders to put proposals to governors to revise the school day for September 2015, to promote attendance and maximise time for learning.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, members of the governing body, archdiocese and local authority representatives to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. The revised action plan, job descriptions, school data on pupils' progress, and a recent local authority monitoring report were considered, along with information about pupil outcomes and attendance which had become available nationally since my last visit. Classrooms were visited in Years 2, 3, 4 and 5 to see pupils at work, talk with them and look at their books. The focus was mathematics and English, as in the recommendations of the section 5 inspection report. I talked with a group of teachers at lunch-time about recent changes and impact in classrooms, met the learning mentor who works on attendance, and evaluated recent figures for absence across the school.

Context

Since my visit in November 2014, the headteacher has retired. The archdiocese asked you to join the school as acting headteacher until the end of 2015 while the substantive post is advertised, drawing on your experience as a senior leader in schools in Liverpool. You started work at St Marie's two weeks before the current monitoring visit. All governor vacancies have been filled, bringing fresh educational expertise.

Main findings

There have been improvements since my visit six months ago, but not on a wide front. Gains made in English have been won at the expense of mathematics taking a back seat. Some pupils are being left behind by improvements in English because they lack basic handwriting skills. The new acting headteacher has quickly gained an accurate view of strengths and weaknesses and governors are starting to ask questions to take the school forward. However, this has brought to light other areas to which school leaders should have been alert, such as frequent absence of some pupils, and impact of pupil premium spending.

Children's behaviour is better. During my visit, pupils behaved well in classrooms and around the school. They seemed willing to learn, more able to talk about their learning and take pride in their work. These features were also noticed on a learning walk by the headteacher of another school and in local authority monitoring. Pupil progress meetings for each class teacher have become a regular feature of school life. To revise the action plan, school leaders are making better use of information to firm up priorities for the most able pupils, disadvantaged pupils, and boys.

The co-ordinator for English has kept up her support to teachers, who have raised their expectations of what children can achieve in writing, speaking and listening. As a result, the improvements from a low base that I saw last November have been sustained and are becoming normal practice in literacy lessons in the morning. During this time, children write often enough, in a variety of styles and are clearer about the point of their writing.

These gains have come at a cost, though. Many pupils are withdrawn from classes in the morning and afternoon for interventions delivered by teaching assistants, so missing parts of other subjects. A small number of pupils are being asked to do more complicated and lengthy work but have not secured basic handwriting skills. Between Years 2 and 5, some children could not write on the line or form letters of the same size. They confused capitals and lower case and could not read out their work to me with any confidence. All were writing in pencil and printing. The Year 5 pupils will be at secondary school in 2016.

Mathematics has not had the same attention as in English. In class, some teachers worked well with pupils to put right misunderstandings. However, training in mathematics has been limited. Teachers have been given a list of good mathematics resources for children, but not the resources themselves. The school does not have up to date plans for mathematics that meet the demand of the National Curriculum, which was revised for last September. Teachers are not familiar enough with effects on learning and teaching. School leaders have colour-coded the plan, showing which steps were achieved. From the school's own rating, actions in mathematics are behind schedule. Changes made in English show teachers' willingness to change, given the right subject leadership.

All but one class (which has fewer pupils than others) has a teaching assistant assigned to it. In addition, four part-time teachers are employed. Between them, they deliver the large amount of small-group intervention. In class, teaching assistants work across a broad range of subjects and pupil needs. However, the practice is for teachers to brief them for the day in a five-or-ten minute slot before children come into class in the mornings. Other than in Early Years, there is no consistent policy about how teaching assistants should be informed about plans and pupils' needs and longer term plans are not generally shared with them.

Overall attendance has risen to 96.3%. However, this masks persistent absences of older pupils, especially boys, at the end of the week. The learning mentor (attendance) reports all pupils with high absence to the local authority education welfare service. He liaises with other services and some of the children concerned have child protection plans. However, he has carried out this work without regular liaison with the headteacher, who is in charge of safeguarding. The new acting headteacher is aware of this and should act immediately to put this contact in place. She has quickly spotted issues in the curriculum and timetable that are contributing to absence, and made immediate and relevant changes. In the medium term, the school day should be looked at to ensure time for learning is maximised.

The Chair of Governors has taken charge of governor training with great commitment. As a result, governors have taken part in relevant courses on areas of previous weakness, including performance data. A recently-formed 'Raising Achievement Committee' of governors is starting to use this training well. For example, more skilled questioning had led to better use of time for a group of pupils with special needs.

Governors are using their new understanding to steer future use of the pupil premium grant received but they are not well informed about the current and past grants and should remedy this quickly. In some year groups, pupil tracking information shows that it is particularly disadvantaged children who are not achieving targets. Outside help could be employed by governors to carry out a thorough review of use of pupil premium.

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 sources of support in the last two terms have been a local outstanding school (Holy Family, Cronton), links with the archdiocese, monitoring by the local authority, and use of an external consultant in mathematics. The archdiocese has given effective support in the key area of identifying someone to fill the role of acting headteacher, and by ensuring that vacancies for foundation governors have been filled with those who have relevant expertise.

The support of the local authority has worked well in providing challenging data in a format common to schools. This includes wider comparisons, in moderating work in some year groups so that teachers have a better understanding of standards achieved elsewhere, and in providing clear evaluation in its recent monitoring review.

Links with a local school have helped the subject leader with ideas and resources to improve English. A consultant gave a training session on National Curriculum primary mathematics. This gave teachers a broad overview of what has been required since September 2014 but was too limited to give them skills, resources and curriculum plans to make this change.

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

Yours sincerely

Barbara Comiskey
Her Majesty's Inspector