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7 May 2015

Ms Sarah Steer
Acting Headteacher
Featherby Junior School
Chilham Road
Gillingham
ME8 6BT

Dear Ms Steer

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Featherby Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 6 May 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 January 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection in March 2013 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 last section 5 inspection and plans are not sharply focused on rapidly bringing about improvement. The school should take immediate action to:

- strengthen school improvement plans so that governors and school leaders can more easily evaluate the impact of their actions on outcomes for pupils
- clarify who is responsible for leading, monitoring and evaluating the actions in all of the school's improvement plans
- provide further training for leaders at all levels so they know how to bring about rapid improvements.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and your assistant headteacher, middle leaders, the Chair of Governors and a representative of the local authority to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. You took me on a tour of the school and I visited each class. I evaluated a range of documents, including the school's improvement plans. I also looked at some pupils' books.

Context

Following the last inspection the headteacher left the school. You took up the post of acting headteacher at the beginning of March. This was initially to be until the end of the summer term, but this has now been extended to the end of December 2015. Local authority plans for the future of the school are under discussion.

Main findings

Since you joined the school as acting headteacher you have made an immediate impact. You stabilised the school, after the departure of the previous headteacher, and raised staff morale. You took effective action to improve the behaviour of a small group of pupils. You reorganised classes in Years 5 and 6 for English and mathematics, which has provided more challenge for the most able and greater support for the least able pupils and those with special educational needs. You deployed learning mentors into classes to support disadvantaged pupils and this is having a positive impact on the progress of pupils in Year 3. The assistant headteacher's role has been refocused on improving pupils' achievement and he has strengthened the systems used for tracking pupils' progress. Staff have welcomed your drive for improvement and many have raised their expectations of pupils.

Since your arrival, you have understandably focussed on taking steps to tackle underperformance and prepare Year 6 for their forthcoming tests. However, due to this focus on short term priorities there has not been enough urgency to systematically address the areas for improvement identified by the inspection.

The school's improvement plans lack clarity and detail. They do not show well enough how actions are expected to improve the outcomes for pupils. The plans lack specific targets for pupils' progress, with clear timelines so that leaders can check that weaker areas are improving quickly. Plans also require more detail about who will monitor and evaluate the actions undertaken. The governors' role in evaluating the impact of the school improvement plans is not clear enough.

School leaders are now regularly gathering assessment information to check pupils' progress and identify pupils who are falling behind. Meetings take place to discuss how to respond and better meet individual pupils' learning needs. However, it is not clear how the targets set will achieve the required increase in standards and pupils' progress.

During my visit to classrooms there was evidence of a greater level of challenge for pupils, particularly the more able. In many classrooms, the atmosphere was purposeful and pupils were appropriately involved in a range of learning activities. Teachers are regularly adding 'red pen questions' to their marking in pupils' books which are helping pupils think more deeply. One pupil told me 'it's useful to get my brain going in the morning'. School leaders have rightly identified that opportunities for pupils to write at length are still limited. Senior and middle leaders have plans to address this as part of the changes they are making to the way literacy is taught from September. A review of pupils' books shows that teachers do not consistently identify punctuation and spelling errors in pupils' work.

You are using a wider range of approaches to check that teaching is good enough, for example through scrutinizing pupils' work. Middle leaders are starting to play a greater role in gathering this information, but it is too early to see what impact this is having on improving the quality of teaching. It is clear that you know where teaching is stronger and where it needs to be better. Plans are being put in place to increase the levels of support and challenge for teachers and to develop the role of middle leaders. These matters require urgent attention and staff held accountable for improving learning.

The recommended reviews of governance and the use of the pupil premium have recently taken place. The governing body have waited for the review of governance before taking action and, as a result, they have been slow to respond to the areas for improvement identified by the inspection. Governors have not taken a strategic approach to driving improvement nor been involved in monitoring and evaluating the school improvement plans. It is not clear how the governors will hold school leaders to account for the improvements needed.

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

Following the inspection and departure of the headteacher, the local authority acted quickly to deploy you from another school as the acting headteacher of Featherby Junior School. During three visits to the school, the local authority officer has supported you to reorganise the responsibilities of the leadership team and identify strengths and weaknesses in the quality of teaching. However, the local authority needs to strengthen its support of your strategic leadership of the school, including improvement planning.

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

Yours sincerely

Theresa Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector