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Cheryl Johnson
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Johnson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Merebrook Infant School

Following my visit to your school on 3 December 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2015. 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 taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection, in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- make better use of information about pupils' achievement, especially the most-able and disadvantaged pupils, when evaluating the impact of actions taken
- place greater focus on enhancing the leadership skills of senior and middle leaders so that they make an even more substantial contribution to improving the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, other senior leaders, governors, and representatives of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated. Short visits were made to Year 2, Year 1 and the early years setting.

Context

Since my previous visit, the deputy headteacher and early years leader have returned from long-term absence. There is a new permanent Year 2 teacher.

Main findings

You have made changes since my last monitoring visit which have led to improvements. Pupils are now more focused on their learning in Year 1 classes because teaching is more consistently effective. Governance is much stronger. The leaders who have returned after long-term absence are clearer about what they need to do and the order in which it needs doing. However, you and your leaders do not always make enough use of information about pupils' achievement when evaluating the impact of the changes you have made. For example, you are not keeping a close enough watch over how well groups of pupils are achieving, especially disadvantaged pupils and the most-able pupils. This should be a priority, particularly in the early years and in Year 1 because published 2015 results indicate that there were wide gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and others.

You have strengthened the way that writing is taught, which was an area for improvement in your last section 5 inspection report. Teachers are now consistently using agreed approaches. For example, in Year 2 classes, pupils are provided with the features they need to use in their writing in order to complete it to a good standard. The list of features is helpfully printed on a sticker which pupils place at the start of their work. However, not all teachers are using their knowledge of each pupil's abilities to suggest additional writing features that the most-able pupils could incorporate. As a result, they do not always make the strong progress of which they are capable. In some classes visited, when pupils had completed the list of adjectives for animals, the teacher instructed them to think of more adjectives rather than furthering their learning by setting a more challenging task. Some pupils were not engaged by the additional work set and started to chatter and lose their focus.

Governance has improved. The new vice-chair has considerable educational experience which she is bringing to bear on the role. Governors rightly recognise that although there have been improvements, gaps in achievement between disadvantaged pupils and others need to narrow. Governors have set leaders performance targets linked to how well they close these gaps. They sensibly focus on these gaps when they hold leaders to account for the changes they are making. However, the school needs to provide governors with accurate information about pupils' current progress at regular intervals throughout the year. Then governors can

ask leaders to make changes in a timely manner rather than at the end of the year, when some pupils have fallen even further behind.

You have recently written a well-focused school improvement plan, which leaders are using effectively to prioritise and direct their actions. The plan also helps leaders to check that changes are made in a timely manner. The improvement plan does not provide enough detail about how you and governors will develop the school's current leaders. It is crucial that current leaders have the expertise and leadership skills to sustain improvements so that the school can be more responsible for its own development. The improvement plan does not provide sufficient help to leaders and governors in monitoring the impact of planned actions. This is because milestones do not focus enough on pupils' outcomes, especially the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and the most able.

External support

The support provided by the local authority has been strong because the authority has, rightly, set up a Targeted Improvement Board (TIB) to keep a careful watch over the school. The board rigorously holds you and the governors to account for the impact of the support provided on pupils' achievement, as well as the rate at which the school is improving. Where necessary, the board challenges the school to make further changes to the way it deploys the support the local authority provides so that it has a bigger impact. The local authority's assistance has focused on helping the early years leader and supporting the development of new approaches to writing. The school is working towards, but has not yet reached, the stage where it is able to sustain improvements without external assistance. One contributory factor is that not enough focus has been placed on enhancing the leadership skills of the school's senior and middle leaders, such as the numeracy lead.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Milton Keynes.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard
Her Majesty's Inspector