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Mrs Amanda Powell  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Powell

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to The Acorns Primary and Nursery School, Cheshire West and Chester**

Following my visit to your school on 10 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 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, in order to become a good school. The school should take further action to:

- review the current strategies for supporting pupils' achievement in Year 5 and Year 6 so that gaps in pupils' learning are tackled vigorously
- look again at the changes in the Year 1 classroom to make sure the extra activities in place are targeted more closely to weaknesses in pupils' skills and knowledge
- refine the school improvement plan so that there is a greater emphasis on the role of the governing body in driving and checking on change
- further develop the strategy for teaching writing so that there is a whole-school approach which is used in every classroom.

**Evidence**

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher, senior leaders and a group of 10 teachers and teaching assistants to discuss the actions

taken since the last inspection. I also met with three members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority. You and I visited every classroom to observe pupils at work and to look at their books. I evaluated your improvement plan and considered other evidence, including the 2015 validated outcomes for pupils, achievement information for pupils currently at the school and your checks on teaching. I chatted to a group of six older pupils to gain their views of the school.

## **Context**

There has been a considerable turnaround in staff since the June inspection. Five teachers have left the school. They have been replaced by four full-time new recruits. There has also been movement across classes, so many teachers are working with a different age range. Almost every teacher in Key Stage 2 is new to the school or new to teaching older pupils. Leaders of the early years, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 took on these posts in September 2015. Two teachers were absent at the time of the inspection.

## **Main findings**

The findings from the recent inspection came as no surprise to you, the staff and the governing body. Everyone knew that the school's effectiveness had slipped, and work was already underway to tackle shortcomings. As a result, no time has been wasted disputing the inspection judgements or harking back to the past. You have all drawn a line in the sand, focused on the future and set about taking positive and effective action to secure improvement.

There is a shared determination to improve: everyone is keen to play their part and new teachers are being brought into the fold swiftly. Their willingness and desire to be part of 'Team Acorns' means that they have adapted to new ways of working faultlessly. Consequently, all teachers are following whole-school policies to the letter so that pupils are benefiting from stronger teaching as they move from class to class. Staff are buoyed up with the signs of early success; morale is high. This is going a long way towards extending the school's capacity to tackle weaknesses.

No-one is any doubt that there is much to do to ensure that the school is judged good the next time inspectors cross the school gates. The 2015 results are no cause for celebration; they explain why the school is no longer good. Your own information and the work in pupils' books point to an improving picture in terms of pupils' achievement. Nonetheless, pupils' achievement in Years 5 and 6 is way below par. These pupils are carrying a heavy burden, which is standing in the way of their success. They entered Year 3 with low starting points, and weaker teaching over time has not helped them to gain ground. They have a long journey ahead of them to reach the levels that are expected for their age. This is not news to you. Governors have already committed extra financial resources to shore up additional teaching in these year groups. Nonetheless, teaching is not going far enough in

picking up gaps in pupils' prior learning or helping pupils to make the required rapid progress.

Your actions are bearing fruit. Teaching is much stronger than at the time of the last inspection. You are using all of the tools available to support teachers in their quest to become the best. External advice and guidance is targeted well on teachers who need extra help to improve. Links with your partner school and other schools in the locality are being exploited so that teachers can learn from others.

Expertise within the school is harnessed effectively to share good practice. It is quite common for teachers from different year groups to work alongside each other, planning lessons jointly, observing each other teach and trying out new ways of working. This is beginning to lift the quality of teaching across the school. Furthermore, the opportunity for teachers to see one another in action is leading to an air of openness and honesty. Staff are not afraid to celebrate what works well in their classroom or to ask for help when they come across difficulties. Teachers know support is on hand to help them overcome any barriers that are getting in the way of success.

You and other leaders are keeping a much closer eye on teaching than in the past. Your views of teaching across the school are accurate because you check pupils' books and talk to pupils alongside your visits to classrooms. Teachers are benefiting from clear and useful targets to help them improve their practice.

Your work to improve the quality of teachers' marking is forging ahead quickly. Without exception, all staff follow the agreed policy, which is helping pupils to spot and rectify their mistakes before they take hold. Teachers' marking of pupils' efforts in mathematics is particularly note-worthy. Teachers' encouraging comments ensure that pupils explain their mathematical ideas. This practice is deepening pupils' learning and helping teachers to spot any muddled thinking which may hold pupils back in the future. Pupils are responding well to teachers' increasing enthusiasm and higher expectations. As a result, pupils' books are well presented and the range, quality and quantity of work are noticeably stronger than in the past.

Middle and subject leaders are stepping up to the mark and beginning to make a much stronger contribution to school development. You are giving these leaders the time, space and appropriate training to carry out their roles more effectively. They are brimming over with excitement about what has been achieved and their plans for the next stage of the journey. Leaders have a better understanding of their areas of responsibility because they are visiting classrooms more frequently, checking pupils' work and talking to pupils about their experience at school. They are delivering training which is beginning to lead to whole-school approaches to teaching techniques. This is making the biggest difference in mathematics. The subject leaders are surging ahead to make sure that teachers give pupils an opportunity to apply their mathematical skills to solve problems which require reasoning and logic.

The teaching of writing is beginning to shift, but there is still a way to go to ensure that there is a shared approach in developing pupils' writing skills across the school.

More children reached the levels expected for their age at the end of Reception in 2015. This is a positive step forward; fewer children are on catch-up from the very beginning. However, there is still a small group who do not have the skills and knowledge to meet the demands of Year 1. A lot of time and energy is being spent in trying to meet the needs of this group in the Year 1 classroom. There are more opportunities for pupils to learn through play so that they can bridge the gap between their time in early years and Key Stage 1. However, despite everyone's best efforts, the extra provision in classrooms is not planned well enough to close the gaps in pupils' learning.

Members of the governing body have high ambitions for the school. Despite the praise for their work in the inspection report, they have not sat back. For example, they are proving to be a powerful ally to you in developing the role of subject leaders. Governors are acting as another set of eyes and ears to keep a check on progress. They give their time generously, visiting school and monitoring the work of leaders frequently. They are keen to capture parents' views and ideas. As a result, they are holding a half-termly 'drop-in' so that parents can talk about their concerns and share their praise for the changes being made. They know the school's strengths and weaknesses inside out because they understand school data and they ask relevant and often searching questions.

You know what needs to happen next to build on recent improvements. The next steps in the journey towards good are articulated clearly in your action plan. This is setting a clear course for success. Your plan is helpful to staff and governors because you have set out your goals and included the key steps to help measure success along the way. Nevertheless, the role of governors in supporting improvement and checking the difference this is making to teaching and pupils achievement is not described well enough in your plan.

Pupils are appreciative and positive about all that is being done to improve the school. They are noticing a difference in the quality of teaching; one pupil commented: 'Our teachers are perfect; we are lucky to have them.' Their increasing enjoyment of learning is leading to better behaviour in most, but not all, classrooms. Pupils are less inclined to mark time or to allow their attention to drift because teachers are planning more purposeful and interesting activities. As a result, pupils are more likely to put pen to paper. Most classroom chatter now relates to pupils' work.

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 is providing purposeful and effective support. Local authority officers are working in close partnership with you and your staff to help you overcome weaknesses in teaching and leadership. Subject leaders and teachers are full of praise for the constructive support they have received from local authority officers. This is helping them to refresh their teaching skills and equip them with the tools to develop their areas of responsibility. This support package is working well because it has been planned carefully and local authority officers tailor their work to meet the needs of the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Joanne Olsson  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**