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Mrs Rachael Coulthard
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Miss Forster

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Mark's CE Primary School

Following my visit with Stephen Rigby, Ofsted Inspector, to your school on 15 and 16 December 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Wigan.

Yours sincerely

Martin Bell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2015

■ Urgently improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least good, and in so doing improve the progress of all groups of pupils across the school by:

- ensuring that teachers and teaching assistants have the highest possible expectations of the progress pupils are capable of making and of their behaviour
- making sure that tasks and activities in lessons match the skills and abilities of all pupils so that they are less likely to become frustrated
- ensuring that marking is precise and identifies how pupils can improve their learning
- making sure that pupils' writing, grammar, punctuation and spelling skills are developed consistently across all subjects
- ensuring that pupils are provided with as many opportunities as possible to practise their reading skills
- checking frequently in mathematics lessons that pupils can apply their mathematical understanding to problem-solving activities.

■ Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by:

- making sure that governors use their skills to challenge school leaders effectively, and hold senior leaders to account for raising standards
- ensuring that senior leaders provide regular training for staff
- putting into place clear plans for improving the quality of teaching
- monitoring the curriculum in order to ensure that it is fully effective
- holding teachers fully to account for the performance of pupils
- ensuring that data on pupils' performance are accurate and used effectively by all staff to monitor the performance of pupils closely
- improving provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs through enhancing leadership, the quality of teaching and arrangements for supporting these pupils
- ensuring that middle leaders, including those responsible for English and mathematics, have a fuller role in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

■ Improve pupils' behaviour and safety by:

- making learning more interesting so pupils are more enthused in lessons
- communicating clear expectations to pupils about how they should behave in class
- fostering better relationships with parents in order to improve pupils' attendance further
- making sure that any bullying is dealt with swiftly and effectively and to parents' satisfaction
- making certain that any racist incidents are properly recorded.

■ **Improve children's achievement in the early years so that they are better equipped with the skills necessary for their learning in Year 1 by:**

- making sure that teaching is always at least good
- ensuring that the leader monitors the performance of children accurately, assesses how they are developing, and uses the resulting information effectively to plan the next steps in their learning
- ensuring that the leader provides regular training for staff.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 December 2015

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised a wide range of documents and met with the Executive Headteacher, Head of School, subject and other leaders, members of the governing body, a representative of the local authority and a representative of the diocese. I spoke to two groups of pupils and held a number of informal conversations with other pupils across the school and during lunchtime. Inspectors observed lessons in every class and I conducted a joint book scrutiny with senior leaders.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the proposed federation with Atherton St George's CE Primary School has been formalised. As a result, a new governing body was formed in September. The headteacher of Atherton St George's has been appointed in the role of executive headteacher. Several new teachers joined the school at the start of the new term. A new early years leader and a new leader for the provision for pupils with special educational needs have also been appointed. Furthermore, a small pastoral team has been established to offer support and guidance to pupils and families.

Outcomes for pupils

The early years provision is beginning to blossom. A closely knit team, led energetically by the newly appointed manager, bring a dynamic approach to teaching and learning. High expectations of what children can achieve and a revitalised and purposeful learning environment mean that every child has made progress in their learning, no matter what their starting point, this term. The proportion of children who achieved a good level of development increased significantly in 2015, remaining, however, substantially below that seen nationally. Nonetheless, assessment information provided by the school and learning observed during the inspection suggests that these improvements are set to continue.

Significant disruption to pupils' learning in 2015 resulted in a sharp fall in the proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the phonics screening check at the end of Year 1. Leaders are robustly addressing this issue and recent support

from a specialist leader of education has begun to help improve the quality of the teaching of phonics. The executive headteacher has introduced a new system to monitor pupils' progress and holds regular meetings with teachers to check that pupils are on track. As a result, pupils are beginning to acquire the phonics skills they require. However, a substantial proportion of pupils continue to work at levels below those expected for their age due to the legacy of previously inadequate teaching.

In Key Stage 1, achievement improved significantly in reading, writing and mathematics for pupils leaving Year 2 at the end of the summer term. Given the significant gaps that this cohort of pupils had in their learning, due to the poor start to their education at the school, this is a positive achievement. The relentless focus on raising the profile of reading is beginning to make a difference and pupils are making progress in their learning. However, gaps in knowledge and understanding in mathematics and, especially, writing are proving more stubborn to plug. As a result, a large proportion of pupils have not made the progress expected of them and significant work remains to be done to ensure that pupils reach the expected standards by the end of Year 2.

In Key Stage 2, the standards that pupils reached at the end of Year 6 improved in mathematics in 2015. However, improvements in writing were less pronounced and standards in reading remained similar to those seen in 2014. Both reading and writing results were significantly below the national average. However, leaders' actions to improve the quality of teaching is beginning to pay dividends. Evidence seen in books and during lessons points to an improving picture with pupils making progress since the start of the autumn term, particularly in reading. Nonetheless, improvements are not yet consistent across all subjects and all classes. The progress that pupils make in some classes remains a concern.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

The quality of teaching, learning and assessment has improved since my first monitoring visit. Teachers are now becoming more adept at using what they know about pupils' previous learning to plan lessons that match the abilities of different groups of pupils. In a Year 5 mathematics lesson, for example, pupils made good progress because the division problems that they were asked to tackle were pitched precisely at the right level.

Leaders have taken decisive action to improve the quality of the teaching and learning of phonics. Support and training has been provided to ensure that all staff have the necessary skills required. As a result, gaps in pupils' knowledge are beginning to be filled. In a Year 2 lesson, for example, pupils made rapid gains in their learning when learning the 'igh' sound. This was because the teaching assistant delivering the lesson had strong subject knowledge and held pupils' attention with engaging activities.

A new marking and feedback policy has been introduced across the school. Teachers are developing their own skills, with the support of leaders, to ensure that their feedback to pupils has a positive impact on moving learning forward. In line with the school policy, pupils are beginning to respond more regularly to their teachers' comments. They say that this is helping them to understand what to do to improve their work. However, inconsistencies in the implementation of the school policy mean that the impact of feedback is variable. Leaders are aware of this issue and have begun to take action to support teachers. The Head of School, for instance, has recently held a workshop to demonstrate how feedback can rapidly improve pupils' writing.

Leaders have introduced a raft of initiatives to develop a love of reading throughout the school. For example, pupils were delighted to receive awards during assembly that celebrated their 'extreme reading' in places such as on top of a car! The development of the school library and the purchase of a significant number of new books have contributed well to the growing enjoyment of reading across the school. However, in a small number of reading lessons observed during my visit, some pupils did not make the progress expected of them. This was because the independent activities that teachers planned did not hold the attention of pupils or develop their reading skills effectively.

Teachers have cultivated strong relationships with the pupils in their class. They are quick to celebrate and share success, helping to build pupils' confidence and self-esteem. Pupils say that teachers are making their lessons more fun. In a Key Stage 1 lesson, for instance, a group of pupils enjoyed learning the alphabet while singing and dancing with their teacher.

To ensure that pupils develop a firm grasp of the basic skills they require in mathematics, teachers have emphasised the teaching of number skills this term. This is helping to close the gaps in pupils' knowledge across the school. However, a lack of frequent problem solving and reasoning activities means that pupils are not given enough opportunities to deepen their understanding.

Pupils speak highly of the extra lessons that mentors deliver before and after school. While no formal assessment of the impact of this new initiative has yet taken place, anecdotal evidence suggests that these sessions are giving pupils greater confidence and tackling the gaps in their knowledge.

Pupils' presentation and handwriting has improved since the time of my first monitoring visit. This is because teachers now have higher expectations and communicate these effectively to pupils. The introduction of contract cards (an exemplar piece of each pupil's work) has also served to remind pupils of what is expected of them. Nonetheless, there is still room for further improvement in this area.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

A new behaviour policy, which communicates high expectations, has been introduced this term. Consequently, pupils say that behaviour in lessons has improved. Inspectors' observations support this view, although pockets of less strong behaviour remain, especially where teaching does not ignite pupils' enthusiasm or where work does not match their needs. Pupils generally play sensibly and get along well during break times. A small area of the playground, however, is sometimes not effectively supervised due to its location away from the main junior area. While this did not cause any problems during the time of the inspection, leaders are aware that this is an issue to address with urgency.

Those pupils that spoke to inspectors say that bullying is rare at the school and is dealt with effectively by adults. The school now records all incidents and ensures, through the newly formed and highly regarded pastoral team, that any issues are tackled promptly.

Leaders have taken effective action to improve communication with parents. The new school Facebook page, for example, has quickly become an established means of parents keeping in touch with what is happening at the school. Parents and pupils are welcomed warmly each morning at the school entrance, giving valued opportunities for parents and teachers to speak regularly. Greater communication, as well as the introduction of a range of other initiatives, has helped to improve pupils' attendance. The proportion of pupils who are absent from school often has fallen and is now below the national average. Overall attendance is also improving over time, but remains slightly below the national average.

Work to keep pupils safe (safeguarding) is being undertaken with a renewed focus. Training for staff and a new system for recording any concerns has helped to ensure that safeguarding is seen as everyone's business. As a consequence, the volume of work to support pupils and families undertaken by the school pastoral team has increased substantially this term. School leaders and the local authority are exploring options to develop the capacity of the pastoral team further.

Effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher and Head of School have quickly set about transforming the culture and ethos of the school. Their determined and dynamic leadership is steering the school on a course of rapid improvement. They are winning hearts and minds, so that the whole school community is beginning to work in unison towards the same ambitious vision.

A relentless drive to improve the quality of teaching and learning has brought about swift improvements. Leaders use checks on lessons to identify areas of strength within the school and ensure that good practice is shared. Where areas for improvement are identified, support is put in place quickly and training is provided.

Senior leaders act as role models and use their own expertise to demonstrate good practice.

The newly formed governing body has hit the ground running, wasting no time to get to know the school well. They demonstrate an unwavering commitment to ensuring that the pupils at St Mark's receive the education that they deserve. Governors are frequent visitors to school and check for themselves the impact of the actions of leaders. They are uncompromising in their ambition and hold leaders fully to account to ensure that planned improvements remain on track.

Financial management has recently been bolstered by the support of the business manager from the partner school in the federation. Her work, alongside an audit from the local authority, will enable leaders to have a clear and accurate understanding of the schools financial position early in the New Year.

External support

The local authority and diocese continue to support the school very effectively. Good links have been established with other schools through work with a local leader of education and specialist leaders of education.