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Ms Karen Harden
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Harden

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Southminster CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 2 February 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings of my visit. 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 July 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 previous section 5 inspection, in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, senior leaders, pupils, three members of the Governing Body and the Director of the Diocese of Chelmsford Vine Schools Trust to discuss the actions being taken to improve the school. I scrutinised a range of documents and visited every classroom. I also looked at pupils' books and spoke with pupils about their work.

Context

Since the previous inspection, one teacher has joined the school in September 2015 and there is an ongoing maternity leave. The school has reduced its pupil roll, effectively losing one class. As a consequence, there are now split year groups

across the school with the exception of early years. There is also a new Vice-Chair of Governors and three other new governors. As a result of these new appointments, nearly half of the governing body is new to their roles and to the school.

Main findings

Senior leaders and governors have responded to the findings from the last inspection. You have written an improvement plan for this academic year to address all of the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection. Each action in the plan has success criteria. However, these are not as measurable as they could be. The result is that leaders and governors are not able to check if the action taken has directly contributed to improvements in pupils' progress.

In 2015, pupils made better progress than in 2014. Although this was still below that expected in reading and mathematics, more pupils in 2015 attained the expected levels in Key Stage 2. The proportion of pupils who made expected progress in writing is above the national average. However, the proportion of pupils who achieved more than expected progress in reading, writing and mathematics was below the national average. Disadvantaged pupils in Key Stage 2 did not attain as well as their peers in reading, writing or mathematics. This group's progress from the end of Key Stage 1 was similar to their peers in reading and writing. Not enough of this group, however, made more than expected progress when compared with the national average.

Attainment at the end of Key Stage 1 in 2015 did not improve on 2014. As a consequence, pupils' attainment remains below that expected in reading and mathematics and significantly below average in writing. Disadvantaged pupils did not attain as well as their peers or this group nationally, in reading, writing or mathematics. They did, however, make the expected progress. The proportion of pupils who gained the expected level in the phonics screening check in Year 1 improved from 2014, to above the national average. In the early years in 2015, the proportion of children who reached the expected level of development was in line with the national average and has improved on 2014. From a low starting point, these children made good progress during their time in Reception and were well prepared for Year 1.

The focus of leaders' work since the previous inspection has been on improving the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. Despite the recruiting difficulties that the school has encountered, the quality of teaching is improving. This is particularly so in mathematics across the school. As a consequence, there is a growing proportion of pupils currently in the school who are making more than expected progress from their various starting points. We saw mathematics sessions in almost all classes. Teachers were confident in what they were teaching, and much of this was interesting and motivating for the pupils. As a result, pupils were eager to challenge themselves to achieve their best, often choosing the 'trickiest challenge' of those offered by the teacher. Additional adults supported well, addressing any

misconceptions and encouraging pupils to think hard about what they already know and what they were learning. Pupils told me that they find teachers very supportive and marking helpful. They also know that they have improved, for example in knowing their times tables better. Parents have also said that the maths parent partnership sessions have helped them immensely in better understanding both how they can help their child with homework and how well their child is doing. One parent said, 'I will be able to understand more when my child feels she's struggling and be able to help her in a way we both understand.'

There is still some way to go in ensuring the same level of success in the teaching of writing. Lessons seen during my visit showed that not all teachers have secure knowledge about how to teach writing. A large proportion of pupils were also unclear about what they would need to do to improve their work, despite the emphasis that you have put on developing pupils' targets. Although there has been improvement in pupils' application of their phonics and grammar skills, there is little in books to show good progress in many other aspects of writing. You and your senior leaders have been monitoring the impact of the school's chosen system for teaching writing. Based on your evaluation and the limited progress of pupils in the autumn term, you have rightly decided that you will be making significant changes to how the teaching of writing is organised. Ensuring that all pupils have equal and regular access to good teaching that builds on prior learning is key to their rapid progress. Currently this is not the case. As a consequence, too much of teachers' time is spent gathering information about what pupils know and what they need to do to improve. There are also limited opportunities for pupils to write at length and to practise their writing skills. Leaders have begun to address this by introducing Big Write and Big Talk sessions. However, leaders recognise that teachers are not yet implementing these sessions consistently across the school.

You have responded to governors' requests to ensure that the assessment information they receive is useful. Reports now highlight pupil progress and attainment for each year group. Although this work is still developing, there is clear evidence that governors understand what the information is telling them and they challenge leaders about the school's work to improve pupil outcomes.

You and your senior leaders have continued to refine the school's assessment system so that it is used more rigorously and regularly to check on pupils' progress and attainment. This means that there is better identification of individual children who are at risk of falling behind. Although teachers' assessments are still cautious, the confidence that teachers have in making accurate judgements of pupils' progress is growing. You have ensured that training and moderation with other local schools has better prepared teachers for making accurate judgements. The English and mathematics leaders, who are relatively new to the leadership team, have a clearer view of the area for which they are responsible. This is because they are more involved in the monitoring of pupils' progress. They have written and shared their action plans, and, as a consequence, the momentum to drive forward whole-school improvement has been strengthened. Although these plans are detailed, they are

modelled on the school's improvement plan; they are, therefore, not focused tightly enough on regular monitoring of the quality of teaching in reading, writing and mathematics or on the impact on pupil outcomes, which is where the foci must remain.

The school's safeguarding procedures continue to meet requirements. You have worked hard with parents to ensure that pupils attend school regularly and that parents understand the impact poor attendance has on pupils' progress. Rigorous processes are in place to track pupils and letters are sent to parents when attendance falls below 90%. Although there has been some improvement in the attendance of vulnerable pupils, their attendance remains below the national average. Governors recognise the significance of this and will continue to support leaders, during Parent Forum meetings, to further raise the profile of the importance of regular, punctual attendance.

External support

The support provided by the Trust since the inspection continues. The Trust has invested in a structured school improvement programme to support the leadership of the school. As a result, middle and senior leaders have received training on, for example, the new curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. Leaders and governors have maintained a positive and productive relationship with the local authority, who have also continued to support the school by evaluating the impact of the improvement programme. A report from the local authority is being prepared but early feedback is that the outcome was very positive, particularly with respect to how well middle and senior leaders are developing. It is noted that you were unable to attend Ofsted's 'Getting to Good' programme, but that you are keen to do so. In the meantime, you have had several development days with external providers and been proactive about working with other schools on, for example, moderation of writing. You have also ensured that leaders work closely with the mathematics cluster of schools and the local secondary school. As a result, a two-day Easter holiday mathematics programme is planned for targeted pupils in Year 6.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections, and it is likely that I will provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of the Trust, the Diocese and the Director of Children's Services for Essex local authority. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector