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Mr Peter Sweeney
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Sweeney

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St John's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 12 October 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 December 2013. 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.

Leaders and governors should take further action to:

- implement development plans that match the rigour of leaders' monitoring plans
- make clear to all involved what the expected successes are and by when they will be achieved.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the executive headteacher, the head of school, the vice-chair of the governing body, the special educational needs

coordinator, the early years teacher and the local authority strategic lead adviser to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school development plan and monitoring schedule were evaluated; assessment information and the outcomes of monitoring activities were also taken into account. The inspector visited classes with the head of school, spoke to pupils about their learning and looked at their work.

Context

There have been a number of changes to the leadership of the school since the last monitoring inspection. The substantive headteacher left the school and two interim acting headteachers led the school for consecutive periods of time over the last academic year. An executive headteacher, who also leads a local Catholic secondary school, has been appointed to a part-time leadership role. The deputy headteacher has been appointed as the new head of school. The schools have formed a soft federation together. Two new governors have been elected. Three new teachers joined the school at the start of the academic year; two left earlier in the term and they have been replaced.

Main findings

The quality of teaching has improved markedly since the last monitoring inspection. Teachers understand the expectations set by leaders. They are all using the agreed strategies for sharing learning expectations in lessons, for marking pupils' work and for improving how much pupils take responsibility for moving their own learning on. Pupils readily discuss their work and draw on each other's ideas to extend their thinking. Their work shows they are responding to increased levels of challenge and are consequently making better progress, most particularly in writing.

Similar improvements are evident in the quality of the classroom learning environments. In each class, examples of work in progress, developed with the pupils, are used to help them remember how to manage their new learning. Through these displays too, pupils are reminded of the strategies they are expected to use to help them when they get stuck or when they need to make an extra effort to succeed.

The new executive headteacher and head of school use their complementary skills well; they have worked together quickly to identify the school's strengths and remaining weaknesses. Development planning is at an early stage because these arrangements are still very new, so some of the longer-term expectations for improvement are not clear enough. The head of school is now leading the development of teaching and learning. The executive headteacher is principally managing the financial and business aspects of the school's work, but his experience of challenging and developing staff to improve their teaching is also being used well. Staff receive good guidance and appropriate training to help them develop the quality of their work; this is the major reason for the evident improvements in teaching. Those spoken to said that morale is higher and their understanding of

what is expected has improved. The changes to staffing made already this term are the result of effective monitoring and reflect well leaders' and governors' determination to further the improvements already made. Appropriate strategies are in place to support the very new teachers to rapidly get up to speed with leaders' expectations.

The number of experienced leaders is currently limited because of the changes that have been made and the relatively small number of staff. Leadership capacity is, however, being developed through drawing on the expertise of local authority advisers and leaders in the partner school to enhance and develop the roles and responsibilities of the current staff. For example, the Reception teacher has implemented her own plans to support boys to make more rapid progress in order to close the gap between boys' and girls' attainment. During the visit, a group of boys were effectively learning early writing skills by drawing chalk 'routes' and traffic signs as they played outside.

Assessment information and 2015 outcomes show that pupils are making better progress and achieving higher standards as a result of the improved teaching. Pupils' progress is tracked against the new national curriculum standards and those who are falling behind are identified. Current systems for planning the next steps for these pupils do not take enough account of what the pupils themselves need to do to overcome the barriers to their success. Consequently, the help they are given, particularly in mathematics, is not specific enough. The impact of the extra support pupils receive is not measured well enough to enable leaders and governors to understand which strategies are most effective and are giving the best value for money.

Governors have worked hard to find effective leadership solutions for the school. They make regular visits to the school to monitor the progress being made, have audited their skills and sought new members with additional relevant expertise in education. Minutes of governing body meetings show that they are better informed about the standards pupils achieve and about the quality of teaching. There is not enough evidence to show that governors challenge leaders sufficiently about specific aspects of the school's work. For example, how well the funding provided to support disadvantaged pupils is used to accelerate their learning and enhance their well-being.

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 has provided strong, effective and well-targeted support to help the school improve many aspects of its work. In particular, advisers have worked with governors to find the best interim leadership arrangements. There is good evidence to show that the head of school and other leaders have improved the

strategies they use to drive improvement as a result of these being modelled by the more experienced interim leaders. While local authority advice is ongoing to enable less experienced leaders to develop, school leaders themselves are managing and directing this support to where it is needed most.

School-to-school partnerships developed through the interim leadership arrangements are continuing. Leaders and teachers are helped to validate the school's assessments and to continue to improve practice through the models and relationships developed as part of this work.

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

Yours sincerely

Prue Rayner

Her Majesty's Inspector