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Mrs Judith Meek
Acting headteacher
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Greenhead
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Dear Mrs Meek

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Greenhead Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 14 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in April 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school. The school should take immediate action to:

- raise teachers' expectations of what all pupils can achieve, especially those who are most able
- develop a consistent, whole-school approach to the teaching of early reading and increase younger pupils' access to reading material that allows them to practise the sounds they have been learning
- ensure the performance objectives set for individual teachers are clearly linked to the expected good progress of their class and the quality of their teaching over time
- adapt improvement plans so that they include measurable targets related to the impact actions will have on the quality of teaching and pupils' outcomes
- develop the skills of the governing body so that they can address the outcomes of the governance review and challenge leaders more confidently.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, two members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also held telephone conversations with the Director of Education for the Diocese of Durham and Newcastle and the local authority's partnership coordinator for the Haydon Bridge locality. I reviewed the school action plan, documents relating to the performance of staff and the most recent information about pupils' progress. You also accompanied me on a visit to each classroom to observe the quality of teaching, speak to pupils informally about their learning and evaluate the quality of work in pupils' books.

Context

The executive headteacher has been absent from the West Tyne Federation of schools since April 2015. An interim headteacher, working two days per week, was appointed in the short term to oversee three of the schools in the federation (Greenhead, Henshaw and Herdley Bank Primary) but this arrangement lasted only three weeks. Governors promoted some members of teaching staff temporarily as 'teachers-in-charge' while a more permanent leadership solution could be found.

In the last week of the summer term, you took up the post of acting headteacher across three of the West Tyne Federation schools, including Greenhead Primary, until the substantive headteacher returns. You currently work four days per week.

Main findings

You acknowledge that the rate of improvement in the five months since the April inspection has been too slow. Neither the governing body nor the local authority has acted with sufficient urgency to secure suitable leadership in the absence of the substantive headteacher. The school is not yet on a secure enough pathway to becoming good within the next 18 months. Without the clear direction of an experienced leader over the last term, inconsistent approaches to the teaching of reading, a culture of low expectations among staff and weak accountability systems have gone unchallenged; pupils and staff deserve better.

Too few pupils met the expected standard in the Year 1 phonics check in 2015. While outcomes were an improvement on 2014 results, pupils are capable of achieving much more from their typical and above-typical starting points in Reception. While staff focus daily on teaching pupils about letters and the sounds they represent (phonics), there is not a consistent, whole-school approach. Pupils' learning does not build progressively as they move through the school because each member of staff has their own preferred methods of teaching reading. In Reception and Year 1, pupils do not have access to reading books that allow them to practise the letters and sounds they have been learning. This prevents them from quickly developing their confidence and seeing themselves as readers.

Since your recent arrival, you have already achieved some quick wins: pupils have more of their writing celebrated on display; a new approach to assessment has been introduced; and children in the early years have more regular access to the outdoor environment alongside their pre-school friends. Importantly, you are clear that these positive actions have only just scratched the surface of what needs to be done.

Teachers are not used to being observed or receiving constructive feedback on their work. They have not been held to account for the quality of their teaching or pupils' progress; consequently, teachers are too accepting of run-of-the-mill work by pupils. You appreciate that this is a culture that must change quickly if the school's overall effectiveness is to improve. As a starting point, you rightly identify that teachers do not use assessment information as well as they should to design learning tasks that are challenging for all pupils. Teachers' expectations of the most-able pupils, in particular, remain too low; this significant group of pupils do not reach their true potential. There is still a long way to go before a good quality of teaching and learning becomes the norm.

The action plan is not a useful tool for improvement. While the correct overall priorities have been identified to address the main findings of the April inspection, there is too little detail about how actions will make a difference to the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. A lack of measurable targets across the timescale of the plan makes it difficult for leaders, especially governors, to know if the school is on track to reach its aims in the specified time. You are eager to adapt the action plan quickly so that it becomes a key driver for your work.

Governors have sought a review of their practice through a national leader of governance (NLG). Important ways forward have been identified, but there is no clear plan of support to ensure that the recommendations of the review become a swift reality. A core group of governors has formed a steering group committee, at the suggestion of the NLG, but weak action-planning has prevented this group from having the focus it needs to challenge leaders and drive improvement. Governors, in the absence of quicker decisions by the local authority and Diocese, made some important decisions that have proven detrimental to improvement. Governors understand that they were naive to promote some of the class teachers to being 'teachers-in-charge' when they were inexperienced at even a middle leadership level.

As the new acting headteacher, you bring experience and expertise to the school. It has not taken you long to get the measure of pupils, staff and governors alike. You are ambitious for what can be achieved, with a keen eye for improving those aspects of teaching that make the biggest difference to pupils' learning. As such, plans are already in motion to secure a greater quality of practice and far stronger accountability mechanisms. You now need the time and support from governors, the local authority and Diocese to embed your ways of working so that they show the necessary impact on pupils' progress.

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 and Diocese have not worked quickly to stabilise the leadership arrangements for Greenhead and, indeed, the wider federation. A new school improvement partner was only attached to the school from September 2015 and the Haydon Bridge locality was the last to receive a partnership coordinator to oversee this work. Governors have made some hasty decisions in the absence of wider local authority solutions. They have not been supported or challenged in the approaches they have taken. As a result, class teachers have been incentivised to take interim senior leadership positions without the necessary experience, time or support. The local authority's contribution to the school's action plan has not ensured it becomes a robust or useful document for improvement.

Your recent requests for support have been more successful. For example, you are working more closely with the partnership coordinator, who is a national leader of education, to access training for staff. The local authority early years consultant is also supporting you to make quicker changes in Reception. An even greater level of support will need to be secured if the school is to make up the lost ground of previous months and become a good school within the next 18 to 24 months.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Executive Director Wellbeing and Community Health Service for Northumberland and the Director of Education for the Dioceses of Durham and Newcastle. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

Her Majesty's Inspector