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Mrs Rachael Coulthard
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Dear Mrs Coulthard

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

Following my visit to your school on 15–16 March 2016, 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 that have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in March 2015. The full list of the areas for improvement that 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:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint one newly qualified teacher in Key Stage 2 before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Education for the Diocese of Liverpool, the Regional Schools Commissioner and the Director of Children's Services for Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Martin Bell

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that 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 third monitoring inspection on 15 to 16 March 2016

Evidence

I 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 one group of pupils and held a number of informal conversations with other pupils across the school. I also observed teaching and learning in every class and I conducted a joint book scrutiny with senior leaders.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit two teaching assistants have left the school. One teacher and a further teaching assistant are due to leave the school at the end of the current term.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders have sustained the momentum of improvement seen at the last monitoring visit. They use their encyclopaedic knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the school to continuously shape their plans and actions. Plans for improvement map out a clear and ambitious direction of travel. Furthermore, they include useful milestones so that leaders and governors can check that their plans are on track and are being successful in making a positive difference.

The head of school, in her capacity as English subject leader, continues to leave no stone unturned in her ambition to support teachers to develop their skills. In the short period of time since the last monitoring visit, for example, the quality of learning in reading lessons has improved significantly. This is because training for teachers and support staff has helped improve their skills and confidence. A raft of new initiatives, such as the addition of 'phonic application stations' in classrooms are contributing well to secure further improvements in the teaching and learning of phonics (letters and the sounds that they make).

Initiatives to increase pupils' opportunities to read, implemented at the start of the academic year, are monitored closely. These have been most successful in Year 1, Year 3 and Year 4 where there has been a marked increase in the frequency with which pupils read at home. However, pupils in Year 2 read less often. To address this, the school is providing extra support for the pupils in this class, for example by offering an after-school reading club. Efforts to engage and work with parents from this class have not been as successful as in other classes. Only three parents, for instance, attended a recent phonics workshop, compared to over one third of parents from Year 1.

The mathematics subject leader has used recent checks of pupils' books to accurately identify the need for pupils to deepen their mathematical understanding through more frequent problem-solving activities. To support teachers, exemplar lesson planning has been written and shared by the subject leader. However, evidence from my lesson observations and scrutiny of mathematics books show that while some teachers are dipping their toe in delivering lessons that address this shortcoming, there is still a long way to go before this is fully embedded. Leaders recognise this and clear plans of action, including staff training and the purchase of new resources, are in place.

The provision for pupils with disability or special educational needs is improving. Leaders have put in place systems that accurately track the progress that this group of pupils make. This information is used to identify pupils who are falling behind and put in place appropriate support. Leaders and class teachers are now acting upon advice that is given by specialist outside agencies about how to meet pupils' needs. Recently parents have been invited into school to discuss the needs of their children. As a result, there is greater parental involvement and support for the work of the school. Leaders have provided training for teaching staff, including teaching assistants, to ensure that all staff have the skills to support those pupils who have special educational needs. However, monitoring of teaching and learning with a focus on the impact of this training has not yet taken place to enable leaders to judge the success of their actions.

Parental involvement at the school continues to grow. A greater proportion of parents are now involved in organising events, in collaboration with teachers at the school, such as Easter bingo. A recent event to celebrate Mother's day was very well attended, with over half of all pupils represented. Furthermore, the school has been successful in a bid for £10,000 of funding to train parents so that they are able to support each other in helping their children learn at home.

Governors continue to provide appropriate support and robust levels of challenge to leaders of the school. They have refined their approach to visiting the school to check on leaders' actions so that they are more focused and align with the most pertinent areas that require improvement. In partnership with senior leaders, their decisive actions have ensured that the uncertainty about the financial position of the school, seen at my recent visit, has been tackled.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

Leaders' actions, particularly in providing sharply focused training for teachers, has ensured that teaching and learning continue to improve. Nonetheless, leaders recognise that recent changes to assessment, marking and feedback and lesson planning need time to embed so that the quality of teaching is consistently strong across all classes.

The teaching of reading in Key Stage 1, during guided reading sessions particularly, has improved since the last monitoring visit in December 2015. The activities that pupils undertake now have purpose and consequently move learning forward effectively. In Year 1, for example, pupils' phonics knowledge was embedded and extended as a group worked independently on a fun learning activity on computers.

A scrutiny of pupils' books shows that since January there has been a significant increase in the frequency with which pupils write. The introduction of 'extreme writing' every morning, for example, is helping those pupils previously reluctant to write to become more confident. Greater opportunities to write across other subjects is also helping to ensure that pupils are beginning to apply their skills across the curriculum. However, in some classes the quality of writing is not improving as quickly as it needs to. This is because some teachers do not teach the essential 'nuts and bolts' of what to include in effective sentences for different types of writing. As a result, pupils do not always know what is expected of them to produce high-quality work.

In some classes pupils are beginning to be given more frequent opportunities to deepen their mathematical understanding by applying their learning to solve a range of sophisticated problems. However, this is currently the exception rather than the norm. In many classes, teachers are not effectively using what they know about pupils' prior learning to provide activities that build on and deepen learning.

Marking and feedback to pupils continues to evolve at the school. In some classes, the new policy of teachers giving immediate feedback during lessons is proving a useful tool to move learning forward. In Year 6, for example, a suggestion to use 'darker synonyms' was followed up by one pupil to improve their writing very effectively. However, the quality of feedback is not consistently strong across the school. Therefore, its impact on improving the quality of pupils' work is not fully effective.

Teaching and learning in the early years remain a strength of the school and continue to improve. Recent training for teaching assistants has helped to develop their skills further. Their use of questioning to promote thinking and embed learning now mirrors the strengths of the class teacher. Children's interests are ignited by well-chosen activities. During a writing lesson, for instance, children were inspired to write lists, instructions and labels about recently collected frogspawn.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Behaviour in lessons has continued to improve since my previous monitoring visit. In many classes, pupils' attitudes towards their learning have matured and they now participate enthusiastically in lessons. In Year 2, for example, pupils eagerly joined in with a number of activities in a mathematics lesson to attempt to solve money problems.

Pupils say that behaviour on the playground has also improved. As one pupil stated, 'we make new friends every day'. Pupils also say that the changes to where they sit for their lunch have been very positive. They are now able to interact with their peers from different classes and key stages. As a result, older pupils say that they now believe they are good role models for pupils in Key Stage 1.

The initiatives to improve attendance, introduced last term, are now embedded and are making a positive difference. Overall attendance is improving and is now close to the national average.

School leaders, governors and the local authority have acted decisively to address concerns about the volume of work being undertaken to keep pupils safe, highlighted during the last monitoring visit. Two new pastoral workers have been appointed and take up their post in April.

Outcomes for pupils

Strong leadership and teaching in the early years is ensuring that children are making good progress from their starting points. A scrutiny of work and observations of learning during my visit show that children are writing with greater confidence and produce work of increasing quality. Letters are usually correctly formed and children are applying their phonics skills with greater accuracy. An improvement in the quality of questioning by adults in the Reception class has also resulted in children beginning to use a wider and more adventurous range of vocabulary.

The quality of pupils' writing across Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 is improving but nonetheless remains variable. In some classes, such as Year 6, incisive feedback is helping pupils to understand what they need to do to improve the quality of their work. However, pupils in some classes do not reach the standards they are capable of because teachers do not make clear what high-quality writing should include.

The recent introduction of initiatives such as times tables challenge bracelets and before- and after-school maths clubs is helping to plug gaps in pupils' mathematical skills and understanding. However, in many classes across the school, the progress that pupils make stalls, as teachers are not making effective use of assessment information to deliver lessons that challenge pupils effectively.

External support

The school continues to welcome and make effective use of a broad range of external support. Teachers in Key Stage 1, for instance, have worked with a specialist leader of education to improve their teaching of reading. The close links with the partner school in the recently formed federation are also being utilised well. For example, the business manager has rapidly addressed a number of issues that were identified following a local authority audit of financial procedures.