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Dear Miss Perrett

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's CofE (VA) Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 18 April 2016, 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 June 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in June 2015, the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and governors are 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 further action to:

- focus on the progress made by different groups of pupils when carrying out visits to lessons and book scrutinies
- ensure work set builds on and extends pupils' knowledge and skills in mathematics
- raise the level of challenge for the most-able pupils and track the progress that they make

- raise attendance of pupils and reduce the proportions of pupils who are persistently absent
- evaluate the actions listed in the school development plan to identify which are bringing about improvement and which are not.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other leaders, members of the governing body and a former representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school development plan was evaluated. Brief visits were made to all classrooms to observe teaching and talk to pupils about their work. Samples of pupils' books were also looked at. A range of documentation was reviewed including minutes from governing body meetings, monitoring records about the quality of teaching, the latest information about pupils' achievement and records relating to safeguarding.

Context

Since the previous inspection the deputy headteacher has left the school and there is a current vacancy. This position has been advertised but is not yet filled. The role is being covered on a temporary basis by your assistant headteacher. Four phase leader posts have been created to strengthen the leadership within the school. Three new teachers have joined the school since September 2015; two are newly qualified. A new family support worker and two learning mentors have also been appointed in order to support pupils and their families. The school has also begun to admit two-year-olds into school and you plan to extend and develop this provision further in the autumn term.

Main findings

You and the governing body have responded quickly to the recommendations made in the previous inspection report. You have worked hard to engage the local community and build a strong teaching and leadership team. You have stabilised staffing and created a purposeful climate where pupils are beginning to thrive. You have introduced a number of new systems and initiatives to address previous underachievement, accelerate progress and raise standards. You have introduced a new assessment tracking system following the removal of national curriculum levels. You utilise the data collected to identify where additional support is needed. A large number of intervention programmes are in place to help pupils catch up. Data is summarised by subject, year group and pupil group, including boys, girls, disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs, together with pupils who speak English as an additional language. The progress of the most-able pupils is not yet, however, filtered or analysed.

The school development plan sets out the school's key priorities and you have identified clear actions to help achieve your objectives. Although you note when actions have taken place through a colour coding system, you and your governors do not evaluate which actions are leading to improvement and which are not.

Teaching is improving. You and your leadership team are supporting those who are newly qualified or those whose teaching is still not as effective as you would like. Pupils work in mixed year groups but you have kept the numbers in each class as small as possible in order to maximise the level of adult support and attention pupils receive. Pupils are beginning to demonstrate positive attitudes to learning, although some pupils still lack confidence when working independently. You have successfully implemented the new national curriculum and pupils use their literacy skills and numeracy skills in other subjects, especially topic work. For example, pupils in Years 5 and 6 wrote about their experience of making 'Tudor bread and butter'. Due attention has also been applied to improving teachers' marking. Your 'call to action' marking policy is becoming increasingly effective but is not yet embedded securely in all classes.

You have introduced a new tracking system for teachers to use. Teachers assess pupils' skills regularly and input results into the system. They use the information collected, including that from standardised and diagnostic tests, to plan work that addresses any identified areas of weakness in reading, writing and mathematics. Work is usually set at the correct level for pupils with different abilities but work does not always build on or extend what pupils know and can do, especially mathematics. For example, during my visit, pupils in Years 3 and 4 were carrying out three- or four-digit column addition but work in their books showed that some pupils were already confident in this aspect in the autumn term. Additionally, visits to classes and work checked in pupils' books show that the level of challenge, quality and amount of work produced by the most-able pupils needs further development.

In order to improve the quality of teaching you have increased the opportunities for teachers to visit other schools to gather ideas and inform their own practice. Teachers and middle leaders have also benefited from training provided by the local authority and a local teaching school. A significant overhaul of literacy has taken place since September, with a new reading intervention scheme and phonics programme being introduced. All staff, including support staff, received two days' training at the outset to ensure they had the skills needed to teach these programmes well. Phonics is now taught very systematically. The school's own information shows that reading is the strongest subject in all year groups and the large majority of pupils are making good progress. Writing and mathematics are also improving but standards remain below those expected in key stage 2, particularly in Years 5 and 6 where pupils still have significant gaps in their basic skills, especially grammar, punctuation and spelling, owing to weak teaching in the past. Regular intervention work and improved teaching are helping to address this.

Outdoor provision for children in the early years is still evolving. Topics are planned which promote outdoor activities and children participate in 'forest school' activities each week. You now have two-year-olds in school and have plans in place to create a separate classroom with suitable outdoor space for the growing numbers of children joining. Reception children have moved classrooms recently and a decking area has been transformed in a very short space of time to provide opportunities for children to learn outside. However, the range of activities which take place indoors is not yet being transferred outdoors and some areas lack space for the safe use of bicycles and scooters. You acknowledge that this aspect is still in the development stage and the shortcomings of some of the areas available. The 'Danish garden' needs a risk assessment and safety check before being used by young children.

Parents now have increased opportunities to contribute their views and comment on their child's learning in the early years. Termly 'parent voice' sessions are held for parents to look at their child's work and complete a speech bubble with their views and comments. These are added to the children's learning journals or displayed on the wall. Opportunities for parents to attend workshops have also increased to enable parents to support their children more effectively, for example with reading. Improved relationships are developing well between parents and school.

You have developed and strengthened the leadership team. Phase leaders have responsibility for checking the progress of pupils in their respective key stage and ensuring that any support needed is provided. Although relatively new to these roles, all post holders have a clear overview of where strengths and weaknesses lie. They use data to identify where further improvements are needed. Phase leaders also hold subject responsibilities, for example English, mathematics and religious education (RE). They lead training for staff in their subject areas and monitor teaching and learning by checking pupils' books and visiting lessons. However, not enough focus is placed on the progress made by different groups of pupils during these checks. They present data to governors about how well pupils are progressing and plans are in place to feed back to governors about the impact of the actions and work of phase leaders.

Since the previous inspection, the governing body has been reconstituted and there are no vacancies. A new chair of governors has been appointed, together with a number of other governors who are highly experienced and knowledgeable. Minutes of governor meetings show that governors ask searching and challenging questions about areas of concern, for example attendance. Governors are involved in monitoring activities and have carried out learning walks with you and your subject leaders and discussed current assessment information. Paired focused visits take place each term. As a result, governors are well informed about the areas targeted, for example the quality of interventions in place and the progress made by pupils with special educational needs and disability.

Governors have canvassed the views of parents. They collect formal and informal feedback through surveys and by talking to parents at events and at the school

gate. Parent governors report that parents have an increasingly positive view of the school and welcome the changes taking place. This is supported by the survey responses collected. Governors also contribute to the school's monthly newsletter by providing parents with information about their roles and responsibilities. Governors keep a close check on the school's key priorities as these are linked to their roles within their committees. They acknowledge and agree that evaluating the actions the school has taken is a necessary next step.

Pupils spoken to say they feel safe in school. Behaviour observed during the visit was good but pupils say that some pupils do not behave well. Records checked show that there have been a small number of fixed-term exclusions this year. Some of this behaviour is linked to individual pupils with emotional needs. You record and monitor behaviour closely and deal with it effectively. Incidents recorded only relate to a very small number of pupils. Pupils are aware of the behaviour policy. Incentives, such as badges for e-praise points, are helping to improve overall behaviour. Pupils have a good understanding of those from different cultures and with different beliefs as these are taught in assembly and RE lessons. Although you have taken steps to improve attendance and reduce the level of persistent absence, attendance remains stubbornly below national average. You do not buy in support from the local authority as you do not feel this has been effective in the past.

A local authority consultant has provided effective training and support for middle leaders. This support has enabled middle leaders to quickly adapt to their new roles and contribute well to whole-school improvement. The school adviser has also provided guidance and support for you in your role as headteacher. Although the adviser no longer works for the local authority, you intend to continue to commission her support as you have developed a good working relationship. While 'project board' meetings were carried out previously by the local authority to monitor the progress being made, these have now ceased to operate. The local authority has not carried out any checks on the school since November 2015.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the director of education for the Diocese of Worcester, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Worcestershire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Heather Simpson
Her Majesty's Inspector