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Mrs Pauline Ward
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Ward

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Southminster CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 21 April 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 second 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, the chair of the governing body and one other member of the governing body, a representative of the diocese and the chief executive officer of the 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 during the classroom visits.

Context

Since my previous visit there have been a number of changes, the most significant of which is your interim appointment to the school two days a week which

commenced after Easter. The diocese and trust supported the appointment knowing that it would not only benefit the school to have an experienced headteacher for a term while the substantive headteacher is absent, but also because it would afford the existing leadership the opportunity to further develop their leadership skills. There is also a temporary teacher, and there have also been changes to the office staff. All of these changes have undoubtedly stretched the capacity of the school to improve apace, of which governors, the trust and the diocese are aware.

Main Findings

Considering that your appointment was so recent, you have quickly grasped where the school is in its improvement journey. You have met with the chair of the governing body, the diocese and the trust, and collectively you are beginning to prioritise what still needs to be done. All partners, including your senior leadership team, agree that some of the leadership's decisions and actions have taken teachers and leaders out of school and the classroom too readily. I am pleased to note that teaching and learning, and pupils' outcomes remain the biggest priority and that you will minimise the disruption to the school day by ensuring that teachers are teaching their classes regularly and consistently.

Many aspects since my last visit have improved. The English and mathematics subject leaders have refined their improvement plans to better reflect the impact of their actions following rigorous monitoring. As a result, it is evident that pupils are making progress, particularly in mathematics and reading, and teaching is improving. Pupils, parents and staff have all responded positively to the recently launched behaviour system. Although the implementation has been successful, governors are keen to see how well this is now established in the school and have a visit planned imminently. Teaching assistants are being used much more effectively to teach phonics across the school. As a result, pupils' phonics skills are being applied well in their reading and developing in their writing.

During my previous visit, the English subject lead and I discussed how reading and writing were taught across the school and the changes that were needed to improve pupils' progress. These changes have now taken place. For example, key texts are now identified for each class, carefully selected to reflect the needs of the pupils. Accurate assessments of pupils' progress in reading are made and teaching adapted accordingly. The impact is that pupils' comprehension skills, an improvement area previously identified, are increasing. Pupils are beginning to use their reading skills in their writing, as could be seen on the newly displayed 'writing working wall'. Timetabling specific sessions for phonics teaching, ensuring regular and sequenced writing sessions that build on reading sessions, and the successful trialling of spelling and dictation sessions in Year 6, are all examples of what is now common place. Leaders are monitoring the new arrangements carefully and current assessment information shows that pupils are likely to exceed national expectations in reading and be close to them in writing by the end of the summer term 2016.

Mathematics continues to develop well. The mathematics subject lead has a very clear understanding of where some teachers' subject knowledge is lacking. This is not limited to less experienced members of staff and the mathematics lead is astutely tailoring support to each individual colleague. Early indications for outcomes by the end of the summer term 2016 are that pupils are on track to achieve expected outcomes in the majority of classes. The mathematics lead has put in place regular assessments which have been used effectively to identify gaps in learning. Where it has been identified that pupils are at risk of falling behind, appropriate support has been put in place and is beginning to pay dividends. There are now more pupils than at the previous visit who are achieving in line with the higher expectations of the national curriculum, particularly at key stage 2.

The main aspect of the school's work that remains less developed is that of assessment. This was identified in my previous visit. While some work has taken place in English and mathematics, there is no clear strategy or rationale communicated to all staff to ensure that they understand what each assessment is for or the intended outcomes. You recognise that this piece of work is long overdue and you have begun already to address this issue by taking the lead on assessment. You have recognised that some of the school's improvement work has not been focused enough on this area and you have re-prioritised it.

The school's safeguarding procedures continue to meet requirements. You are tracking carefully the attendance of vulnerable pupils and tackling this with a renewed determination. As a consequence, these pupils' attendance is improving and parents are responding positively.

External support

The support provided by the trust, the diocese and the local authority continues. All of these partners, including senior leaders within the school, agree that the structured school improvement programme in which the trust has invested will need to be refined in order for the priority of teaching, learning and assessment to be effectively addressed. Governors are aware that school leaders have not yet attended Ofsted's 'Getting to Good' programme. This is something that needs to be done as a matter of some urgency.

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 director of education for the Diocese of Chelmsford, the regional schools

commissioner and the director of children's services for Essex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector