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Mrs Belynda Fellows
Head of School
St James' Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School
Guildford Road
Colchester
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Dear Mrs Fellows

Special measures monitoring inspection of St James' Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 10 and 11 May 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in January 2016.

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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school's raising attainment action plan is fit for purpose.

The school may appoint one newly qualified teacher before the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the interim executive board, 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

Tracy Fielding
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in January 2016

- Improve outcomes by:
 - rapidly increasing the numbers of pupils who make good or better progress in reading, writing and mathematics so that pupils achieve at least as well as others nationally by the end of Key Stage 2
 - providing greater challenge for more-able pupils, including those for whom English is an additional language and those who are disadvantaged
 - increasing achievement in phonics so that more pupils achieve well in reading in Year 1
 - ensuring that assessment of pupils when they join the reception class is accurate and provides a clear picture of pupils' strengths and areas for development.

- Improve teaching and learning by ensuring that:
 - teachers accurately identify what pupils currently know and what they need to learn
 - teachers use accurate assessments to plan lessons that are neither too easy nor too hard for pupils
 - teachers check more regularly on pupils' understanding during lessons
 - all teachers have high expectations of what pupils can achieve in lessons.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - undertaking a regular and accurate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and using this information to create a clear plan for improvement that is rigorously followed through
 - ensuring that all leaders understand and fulfil their responsibilities for improving the performance of the school
 - regularly and systematically checking and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning, taking prompt action when it is not good enough and giving clear guidance to teachers on how to improve
 - ensuring that governors provide greater challenge for leaders and hold them to account more robustly
 - evaluating the impact of interventions, particularly those to support disadvantaged pupils
 - holding all staff accountable for raising outcomes by rigorously managing their performance.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 10 and 11 May 2016

Evidence

During the inspection I visited every classroom to observe teaching and learning, and to look at pupils' books. I met with the chair of the interim executive board and also the lead primary commissioner for north east Essex. An officer representing the Diocese of Chelmsford visited the school to attend the final feedback meeting. Meetings were also held with the executive headteacher, the head of school, the acting deputy headteacher, who is also the special educational needs coordinator, other school leaders and pupils. In addition, I scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including improvement plans, the raising attainment plan, the local authority review report, the school's own records of the quality of teaching, and pupils' progress and achievement information.

Context

Since the last inspection, the headteacher has left the school and the deputy headteacher has been appointed as the head of school. The local authority have secured the experienced headteacher of the neighbouring St Thomas Moore School as executive headteacher. The special educational needs coordinator is now in the role of acting deputy headteacher.

The governing body has been disbanded and replaced with an interim executive board (IEB). This has been in place since April 2016 and two meetings have been held. Discussions have taken place with the Diocese of Chelmsford in preparation for conversion to academy status.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders demonstrate the commitment required to improve the school. The executive headteacher, head of school and acting deputy headteacher are working together well to accurately identify the strengths and areas for development, and are dealing with the issues from the previous inspection quickly. The local authority statement of action is fit for purpose and is being reviewed regularly to continually improve. They have already been successful in raising teachers' expectations, and ensuring that teaching is meeting the needs of pupils. Where underperformance has been identified, school leaders have dealt with this as a matter of urgency.

Leadership roles and responsibilities are now clear and well established. This means that leaders are having a greater impact in improving the school. They have a monitoring system in place and are beginning to use the information from this to implement training for staff. Leaders now have a more accurate understanding of the quality of teaching and learning in the school. They have also sought the advice of the local authority to quality assure their work. However, the follow-up from this accurate monitoring requires more precise action. Leaders set targets for

improvement that are not always specific enough about what the teacher needs to do to improve. While the areas identified are correct, targets need to be more specific and measurable so that the school can assess its impact.

Teachers are applying their improved skills at varying levels and this is enhancing the quality of learning for pupils. For example, leaders have worked hard to develop training on setting high expectations and using personalised support for the differing needs of pupils. As a result, all teachers now demonstrate an increasing awareness of the needs of pupils in their classes. These include, pupils who are vulnerable to underachievement, particularly those who are disadvantaged, pupils who speak an additional language or those who have special educational needs or disability. However, not enough teaching provides stimulating and challenging learning experiences for pupils.

Leaders have involved all staff in the improvement process. Consequently, staff have responded to the challenges identified from the previous inspection with energy and enthusiasm. Staff appreciate the time that they have been given to evaluate and improve their teaching. They feel that this is making a difference to the achievement of pupils.

Although the interim executive board is very new in its support of the school, the chair of the board prepared thoroughly before starting work with the school. As a result, she and the rest of the board know exactly what the school needs to do to improve and are constantly evaluating whether the school is moving rapidly enough. Although only in place for a short time, they are already making a difference.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

While much teaching is improving, there are still some aspects that require more time before they can have full impact on pupils' achievement. Where improvements are evident, this is directly linked to the establishment of systems which are being put into place to improve teaching.

The accuracy of assessment information is improving. This is allowing teachers to have higher expectations about what pupils can achieve and a greater understanding of which pupils need help to catch up. Leaders are determined to focus on any remaining inaccuracies and seek advice from other schools to check the quality of their work.

Teachers' use of questioning, the teaching of phonics and the support provided by teaching assistants have all improved since the previous inspection. The training provided has been fully utilised in these areas so that they are much stronger in supporting the progress of pupils in the school.

More teaching maintains pupils' interest because it is meeting their needs more effectively. For example, in preparation for writing, Year 6 pupils were provided

with a creative image showing an exit from a dark, dull place to a bright, tranquil place. This stimulated lively conversation. Pupils all articulated their ideas well. One pupil said it could be 'your conscience changing as you move through the door'. Another pupil said, 'it could be a metaphor for light and dark situations'.

In order to support different pupils' needs, especially in mathematics, teachers are using practical materials more effectively to enhance learning opportunities. In Years 1 and 2, pupils were able to access the concept of fractions accurately because they had resources they could use to help them 'see the picture'. One pupil who was finding fractions of a number said, 'I can use these cubes because it gives me a picture I can really see of how I can split eight equally'. When questioned how, he demonstrated using the cubes and went on to find half and a quarter of 8 accurately. In these classes, pupils are now thinking about mathematics and problem solving more independently.

However, in some lessons teachers do not recognise when pupils are ready to move on quickly and too much time is spent covering what the pupils already know. As a result, there is still too much repetition of work for pupils who need to move on more quickly. This is especially true for the most-able pupils who say that they sometimes get bored.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

Pupils feel safe at the school. They say that they know adults will listen to them and deal with any problems well. Pupils are generally positive about the school and spoke about 'good things happening'. For example, one pupil said that his teacher was using questions to help him improve his writing and that 'it shows that the teacher cares about how well I do and wants me to be the best I can at my writing'.

Pupils were clear on the behaviour system and spoke enthusiastically of their rewards for positive behaviour. However, some of the most-able pupils feel that they 'get on with things and did not get the praise that others did because they always did as they were told'. One pupil perceptively said, 'sometimes that makes me want to pretend I cannot do something in my work, or not do what I am supposed to deliberately'. The recent local authority review also suggested that this was an area that the school needed to develop. Leaders have adapted their monitoring systems to look at ways to improve this.

More pupils are having personalised support to meet their specific needs, especially those who have special educational needs or disability, pupils who speak an additional language or disadvantaged pupils. The deputy headteacher, in her capacity as the special educational needs coordinator, is working effectively to eradicate any barriers to pupils' chances to learn. For example, a counsellor is providing individual support to pupils one day per week. Scrutiny of this input shows that pupils are approaching their classroom work with more enthusiasm and a 'can do' attitude.

Leaders monitor attendance closely. They set a school target that is communicated to parents and attendance information is shared with parents in the newsletters to raise awareness of the importance of pupils being in school every day. As a result, attendance is improving and is now at the national level.

Outcomes for pupils

Confidence in the accuracy of the school's pupil information is growing. Leaders have a more realistic understanding of the starting points for each pupil and aspirational targets are being set. The recent local authority review and inspection evidence shows that most targets are being met within the set timescale.

Progress is improving but it is still too variable across year groups. Teaching does not ensure that pupils develop enough of a depth in their learning so that they can achieve the most in their lessons. This is especially true of the most-able pupils. School leaders acknowledge that, currently, insufficient information is available to analyse in very specific detail which most-able pupils are making expected or better than expected progress from their actual starting points. Leaders have this in hand and understand the need to address it as a matter of priority in order to help them analyse the impact their actions. This aspect will be a focus of the next monitoring inspection.

External support

The executive headteacher, alongside the work of the interim executive board, is ensuring strong improvement at St James' School. The experienced and successful executive headteacher has an astute understanding of what the school needs to do to improve and is moving it forward rapidly.

The lead commissioner has provided effective support, including regular monitoring visits and support for detailed reviews of teaching and learning. The local authority agrees that despite important improvements, further work is still needed, particularly in relation to assessment. They know that assessment moderation must be completed regularly to secure the accuracy of assessment so the school can reduce the variability in provision across different year groups and pupil groups even quicker. It plans to continue the focused support and carry out review visits regularly.

The school Diocese of Chelmsford representative is part of the interim executive board and has planned visits to the school to monitor aspects of the raising attainment plan.