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Ms Mandy Reddick
Interim headteacher
Caldecote VC Lower School
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Dear Ms Reddick

Special measures monitoring inspection of Caldecote VC Lower School

Following my visit to your school on 14–15 June 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 November 2015.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

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

The school's post-Ofsted action plan is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers 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 St Albans, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. 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 which took place in November 2015.

- Improve safeguarding practice so that it is fully effective by ensuring that:
 - the single central record meets all statutory requirements and that all staff, volunteers and contractors connected with the school are included in its guidelines
 - requirements for ensuring the safe recruitment of all new staff are correctly implemented and procedures for working with volunteers are strengthened so that either a Disclosure and Barring Service check (DBS) has been obtained or a suitable risk assessment carried out before that person is allowed to work directly with pupils, whether supervised or not
 - a designated safeguarding lead is available in school at all times and that anyone who is named as a designated safeguarding lead has been trained to the appropriate level within the last two years
 - procedures for dealing with child protection concerns are strengthened so that meticulous records are kept and held securely by the designated safeguarding lead.

- Improve the quality and effectiveness of leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - the quality of teaching is monitored regularly and thoroughly so that weaker teaching is tackled promptly and the strongest teaching is used to develop best practice throughout the school
 - subject leadership is developed so that individual leaders have a direct impact on improving outcomes and the quality of teaching in their subjects
 - leaders, including governors, monitor the spending of additional government funding and its impact on pupil outcomes, to evaluate whether it is used effectively
 - governors focus sufficiently strongly on the strategic leadership of the school so that they are able to hold leaders fully to account.

- Improve outcomes for pupils so that:
 - individuals and groups of pupils make demonstrably good progress from their starting points
 - attainment in mathematics is raised to at least the national average.

- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment by ensuring that:
 - there is a system in place to allow pupils' progress to be tracked regularly and accurately
 - staff have consistently high expectations so that the work in pupils' books is of good quality in all subjects and all year groups
 - pupils are given sufficient opportunities to develop their investigative skills in mathematics and to write freely and at length across the curriculum
 - teaching in all classes and all subjects engages and motivates pupils so that their interest is maintained throughout lessons.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 14–15 June 2016

Evidence

The interim headteacher and head of school joined most inspection activities undertaken throughout the two days of the inspection. I undertook a tour of all classrooms and spent time in some classrooms to observe teaching and learning, and to look at pupils' books. I met with the chair of the governing body twice, and in one of the meetings with two additional governor representatives. Additionally, I met an officer seconded to the local authority for school improvement work from the diocese of St Albans, the director of education from the diocese of St Albans and the school intervention manager from the local authority. Meetings were also held with the designated lead for safeguarding, the mathematics and English leaders, staff teams, parents and, more informally, pupils. In addition, I scrutinised a wide range of documentation, including the statement of action, the post-Ofsted improvement plan, the local authority review report, the school's own records of the quality of teaching, and pupil progress and achievement information. You also re-issued the Ofsted parent questionnaire to gather more recent parent views. The 10 returned on the second day of the inspection were taken into account along with 15 completed staff questionnaires. As part of the inspection, I also scrutinised the school website to ensure it is compliant.

Context

Since the last inspection the substantive headteacher has left the school. You were appointed as interim headteacher, seconded part-time from a local middle school, and have been in post since September 2015. You are based at the school for one day a week. A head of school has now also been seconded to the school since April for two days per week. Recently, the head of school has been recruited full-time to Caldecote and will take up her post permanently in September 2016. There are two new part-time teachers in post who job share with current teachers.

Public consultation has taken place with a view to establishing a federation between Caldecote Lower School and your own school, Edward Peake Church of England VC Middle School.

The governing body has undergone some changes of personnel. As recommended by the previous inspection, a governance review took place in January 2016.

A pupil premium review was also undertaken in January 2016.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

While leaders have made improvements in their provision for the safeguarding of pupils in their care, they have failed to make enough progress in the many other areas identified in the previous inspection. The school has, therefore, made inadequate progress towards the removal of special measures.

Senior leaders seconded to the school know what the school still needs to do in order to improve. However, despite their many efforts they are facing substantial barriers to quickly making the necessary improvements. These include staff turbulence, difficulty recruiting to vacancies, weak subject leadership, inaccurate assessment and some poor teaching.

Since the previous inspection there has been no full-time headteacher in post in the school. You and the more recent appointment for the head of school are both part-time. There are gaps in the week where there is no headteacher present at the school; however, you make sure you are available to support the school at all times. Currently there have been few opportunities for you and the head of school to communicate, which makes it a challenge to establish consistent monitoring and checking of the school's work. The temporary head of school has now been appointed to a substantive post full-time from September 2016 at Caldecote. This is a positive step forward in establishing consistent leadership, and parents are very supportive of this appointment. However, the complicated and interim leadership arrangements since the previous inspection have meant that leaders have not been in a position to effectively manage the many daily obstacles they are confronting.

Leaders and teachers have not yet established an accurate assessment and monitoring system. Consequently, they do not know how pupils are doing. Although you and the head of school have been working hard to establish a new system of assessment, there are currently no rigorous methods which take account of the new national curriculum or the required higher standards for pupils. Moreover, teachers' assessment knowledge is not strong and they are, therefore, not aware of what these standards should be or how they should assess them. As a result, assessment in the classroom is often inaccurate and overgenerous. Furthermore, the central systems, for example the pupil progress meetings, that leaders use to review their assessment information do not effectively identify and challenge teachers when information suggests that pupils are making rapid progress over time, even though their work does not reflect this. Inspection evidence shows this to be the case and it was confirmed by you and the head of school following your work scrutinising pupils' books and being in the classrooms. Ultimately leaders and teachers do not have an accurate enough view of pupils' improvements.

The school has undertaken an external review of its pupil premium spending for disadvantaged pupils, but it cannot yet truly account for the difference this money is making. Leaders do not know if disadvantaged pupils are benefiting from the additional funding allocated to them. This is also the case for those pupils who have special educational needs or disability and the most able pupils. Leaders do not have the evidence, or know if these groups of pupils are making the progress they should from their various starting points. Consequently, this also means that any work that the school plans to do to support those pupils who may be falling behind or require additional support cannot be appropriately targeted, or accurately measured.

Leaders' monitoring of teaching and learning is fragile in its approach and its rigour. In the very limited time you have had available you have been insightful in identifying many inadequacies in teaching and learning. However, the lack of thorough follow-up to these identified issues means that some teachers are not acting upon the advice that you or the head of school give, and consequently the quality of teaching is not improving quickly enough in all areas.

Leaders, although reviewing the curriculum provision, have yet to resolve the issue of developing leadership for all subject areas. You have ensured various strategies have been implemented in English and mathematics lessons that are encouraging an increase in pupils' quantity of writing and developing their number skills. However, the lack of accurate assessment information means that leaders are not yet able to ascertain whether the various strategies have had any impact on pupils' progress. Additionally, leadership in other areas of the curriculum is still under review and monitoring of these subjects is still in its infancy.

The governors do not yet know the school well enough to hold the leaders to account. While they have rightly, and successfully, contributed to the work undertaken to ensure statutory compliance with safeguarding, they have been inconsistent in their duties to effectively monitor the work of leaders in resolving the weaknesses identified by the inspector in 2015. This is mostly due to their focus being diverted to other matters. Governors have undertaken an external review of their effectiveness. However, there are a number of governors who are still very new to the governing body and have yet to demonstrate that they are supporting and challenging leaders effectively.

It is clear from discussions with parents during the inspection that they are becoming more satisfied with the provision being offered by the school. Many are appreciative of the recent appointment of a permanent head of school from September 2016. Leaders have worked hard to establish a parent forum to improve communication between home and school. Although this is still developing, it is giving a better voice to parents. For example, at the request of parents, the school now produces a weekly newsletter to improve communication.

The arrangements for keeping pupils safe have strengthened considerably. There is now a full-time, qualified designated safeguarding lead on-site at all times. The checks that the school undertakes to assess the suitability of staff to work with children are thorough and precise. The revised school's safeguarding policy reflects current statutory guidance. Senior leaders ensure that records of any concerns raised by pupils, parents or staff about a pupil's safety are sufficiently detailed and that any concerns are followed up promptly.

Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

While all staff are aware that things need to improve, some are not acting effectively to ensure that pupils in their care receive a good education.

Teachers, on occasion, are not using the agreed new strategies in marking and feedback but revert to older systems which were identified in the previous inspection as lacking rigour and effect. In pupils' work, while there are some newer staff who use these new school systems effectively, there are some teachers who fail to do so and leaders do not challenge them. Pupils are often using an array of exercise books for the same subject area, owing to the different teachers they have. Evidence indicates that this is making tracking and development of pupils' skills difficult for both leaders and teachers. A lack of communication between these teachers results in pupils often undertaking work that does not help them to consolidate and deepen the skills and knowledge that they are developing. Subsequently, inconsistency in marking and feedback means that pupils are often receiving poor-quality and inaccurate commentary on their work. Moreover, some teachers do not understand that this practice is failing to improve pupils' learning.

Leaders have put in place strategies to improve English and mathematics at Caldecote. For example, structured daily programmes of number work are helping pupils to develop a better grasp and understanding of mental methods of calculation and to apply their skills effectively. Also, pupils are now given more opportunity to complete extended pieces of writing as a matter of routine so pupils are practising their writing and using their punctuation, grammar and spelling skills more routinely. While these strategies have raised the profile of English and mathematics across the school, there is currently no clear evidence that they are actually improving, or indeed making a difference to, pupil outcomes.

The recent recruitment of some newer teaching staff is bringing energy and new ideas to the team about how pupils should learn at Caldecote. Teachers have attended various training programmes and this is beginning to develop their awareness of how to improve their own practice.

Personal development, behaviour and welfare

When teaching is uninteresting and does not push pupils to think hard about their work, they look bored, they switch off and consequently do not make enough progress. Teachers' expectations are not always high enough and this leads to pupils not making as much of an effort to do as well as they can.

Pupils behave well in and around school. During my visit, they were polite and willingly shared their opinions about their school when they were asked. Pupils reported feeling safe at school. They said that there were adults they could speak to if they were worried about anything, or if they got stuck on their work.

The majority of parents spoken to on the playground, along with those who returned the Ofsted questionnaire issued on the first day of the inspection, confirmed that they felt their child was safe and cared for at the school.

Attendance is slowly improving; however, it is not yet at the national average. The school is emphasising how important it is for pupils to be in school every day. You have also put in place systems and incentives to encourage better attendance. For example, weekly newsletters, class competitions and additional website information are starting to make a difference.

Outcomes for pupils

Pupils' current learning and progress remain inconsistent across the school in key stages 1 and 2. Teaching is not yet enabling pupils to make good enough progress. You, along with the head of school, agree that pupils' work and the rate of learning in lessons is not good enough. Teaching does not yet accurately take account of where pupils have started from. You both also agree, following a thorough look at work in pupils' books during the inspection, that the progress information submitted by teachers is reflective of overgenerous assessment. Books checked by leaders during the inspection saw little evidence of good progress having been made, or no proof at all, and so it could not be verified.

External support

The statement of action is now fit for purpose. It takes into account how the school will communicate to parents and ensures that they are fully informed of the steps towards removal from special measures.

The local authority and the diocese of St Albans have taken action to resolve the issues identified at the inspection with regard to keeping pupils safe.

The local authority school intervention manager is working closely with the school to support and challenge the governing body in their work. She is chair of the

governing body monitoring group. This work is in its initial stages and needs more time to consider what difference it makes to the governing body's effectiveness.

Caldecote Lower School is utilising the support of your own school, Edward Peake Middle School, and that of Northill Lower School. You rightly identify that your priority is to liaise between the schools to secure a more effective assessment system so that leaders know how well pupils are doing.

Both the local authority and the diocese of St Albans agree that in the short term, progress towards removal from special measures has not been as rapid as it could be. The local authority have been working on improvements that will benefit the school in the long term. For example, they took a proactive role in the recent leadership recruitment of the head of school. Both the local authority and the diocese of St Albans are aware of the issues and have plans in place to secure quicker progress being made.