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Dear Mrs Clare McGregor

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Cuthbert's Roman Catholic Voluntary Aided First School, Berwick

Following my visit to your school on 20 September 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 February 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection in October 2013, 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:

- Ensure that the findings of leaders' monitoring activities are logged accurately and are used to inform improvements in teaching and teachers' performance more precisely.
- Provide challenging opportunities and tasks in the early years that meet the needs of children of all abilities, paying particular regard to the development of basic English and mathematics skills, both indoors and outside.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, other senior leaders, pupils, two governors and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school improvement plan was evaluated and lesson observations were undertaken in partnership with the headteacher. A wide range of documents were scrutinised, including safeguarding, behaviour and attendance logs. The outcomes of monitoring activities and the local authority's notes of visits were also examined. Telephone discussions were held with external partners working with the school from the diocese and a national leader in education.

Context

Since the previous inspection there has been some restructuring of staff across key stages and the headteacher now has a one-day teaching commitment in the early years. The chair of the governing body left at the end of the 2016 summer term and elections to secure a new chair of governors are under way. There is currently one parent governor vacancy. One teaching assistant left the school and one new teaching assistant has recently been appointed.

Main findings

Leaders and governors are united in their commitment to securing improvements and this now permeates the ethos of the school. A positive team spirit and shared desire to improve is tangible, exemplified by the joint working of all teaching staff to radically improve the organisation of reading materials across the summer term. This change of dynamics and approach is due to your leadership and drive.

Capacity, in terms of wider leadership, has been developed and strengthened. Middle and senior leaders work collaboratively to conduct regular book scrutinies and monitor teaching and learning across the school. As a result, the effectiveness of actions taken to improve outcomes for pupils are reviewed regularly and further whole-staff training needs are identified. The frequency and rigour of checks on teaching and learning is clearly developing. At times, however, the fine details of this consistent and considerable activity by leaders are not logged carefully enough, meaning that the precise needs of individual teachers and teaching assistants are not captured as effectively as they might be.

All leaders and governors have ownership of the school development plan. It is clearly focused on the recommendations from the previous inspection and identifies what needs to be done, how and by whom. The concerted push to improve consistency and application of the school's assessment and marking policy, for example, is laid out plainly, with actions, desired outcomes and timescales explicitly defined. This has enabled governors to question, support and challenge leaders,

holding them accountable for progress against the plan. Expectations and responsibilities are also spelled out with unmistakable clarity to teachers.

Valuable internal English training by you and support from the local authority's early years consultant have contributed to real improvement in the early years. The proportion of children reaching a good level of development in 2016, at 78.5%, rose to above national averages, signifying a rising trend over the last three years. The quality of teaching and learning is showing measurable improvement. Children in the early years have fun, are safe and enjoy their work. However, not all tasks and opportunities really meet their thirst for learning, particularly with regard to basic English and mathematics skills. During a learning walk we undertook together, it was apparent that some children were engaged in tasks that did not fully meet their learning needs.

Standards and progress in reading across key stages 1 and 2 have also benefited from your leadership of English and spotlight on reading. Purposeful guided reading sessions are now timetabled daily and the profile of reading has been raised through the redesigned library facilities. You have also worked with staff to sort and group books by level of difficulty. This means that staff and pupils are easily able to select appropriate reading material and focus their teaching and learning more closely on required skills. New reading records are kept carefully for each class and the frequency with which reading takes place is monitored. Pupils say they enjoy reading and are particularly pleased that a wide range of non-fiction books is now readily available. As one pupil put it, 'I really like learning facts.' These measures are impacting on pupils' engagement with reading as well as their progress.

External support

The local authority has provided effective support for the school. The early years consultant and school improvement partner have successfully supported and challenged the headteacher, staff and governors to tackle the areas identified for improvement from the previous inspection. Support has also been brokered from the deputy director of education at the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and a national leader in education from Ponteland Middle School. These mechanisms are playing a pivotal role in driving and shaping further improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Fiona Manuel
Her Majesty's Inspector