

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



24 October 2016

Dr Judith Greene
Executive headteacher
Haltwhistle Community Campus Lower School
Woodhead Lane
Haltwhistle
Northumberland
NE49 9DP

Dear Dr Greene

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Haltwhistle Community Campus Lower School

Following my visit to your school on 29 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 March 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and the trust are not 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:

- establish a consistent approach to the teaching of phonics and increase younger pupils' access to reading material that allows them to practise the sounds they have been learning
- ensure that pupils are provided with a broad range of opportunities, across the curriculum, that spark their interest and motivate them to write
- secure pupils' knowledge and understanding of mathematical concepts through the use of appropriate resources, models and images.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, the head of the lower school, the leader responsible for special educational needs and disabilities and the chair of the governing board, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I reviewed the school's plans for improvement and the most recent information about pupils' learning and progress. The head of the lower school accompanied me on a visit to each classroom to observe the quality of teaching, speak to pupils informally about their learning and evaluate the quality of pupils' work over time.

Context

The acting headteacher, substantive deputy headteacher and one other teacher left the school at the end of the summer term. You, as executive headteacher, alongside a new head of lower school and three class teachers, joined the school in September to fill these vacancies and provide additional teaching and leadership capacity. The school is due to be sponsored by Bright Tribe Trust at the end of October 2016. You are employed by Bright Tribe and the head of lower school is employed by the governing board during the transition to the new sponsor to ensure leadership stability. You will both remain as the senior leaders of the school once the sponsorship process has been completed.

Main findings

You recognise that the rate of improvement since the last inspection has been too slow. Interim leadership arrangements over the last year and uncertainty about the timeline for sponsoring with a new trust have contributed to the stalled journey towards becoming a good or better school. While staff have done all that has been asked of them over the last six months, they have not received the specific training or the incisive feedback about their work to raise their game to that of the best. In view of this, pupils' outcomes have not improved quickly enough. The school is not yet on a firm enough footing to ensure that it improves rapidly and provides a good standard of education.

Teaching remains too inconsistent. The learning walk and review of pupils' books, undertaken with the head of lower school, showed teaching practices to be particularly varied in phonics. We observed teachers using different methods to present sounds and words to pupils, hindering progress from class to class. As such, pupils' phonics knowledge does not build systematically; too few pupils become fluent and confident readers during key stage 1. Your head of lower school rightly acknowledges that more work needs to be done to secure better standards of reading. She is acutely aware that the younger pupils, in particular, need more frequent access to reading books that include only the sounds they have been learning so that pupils can quickly practise and apply what they have been taught. A closer eye also needs to be kept on disadvantaged pupils to ensure they are heard reading frequently, both in school and at home, so that they develop secure word recognition skills.

Writing also remains a challenge. While ineffective teaching of phonics has compounded pupils' weaknesses in spelling and handwriting, pupils also struggle to generate their own ideas. As a senior leadership team, you have concluded that this is due to a lack of enrichment across the curriculum with few opportunities for pupils to learn about, and explore, the wider world beyond the immediate locality of the school. Importantly, you have recognised this early and are already formulating plans to ensure that pupils are more motivated to write through a range of different and more exciting stimuli.

Pupils' mathematical development is stronger than their reading and writing. This aspect of the curriculum has been led more successfully over time by a leader from the upper school. This has brought higher expectations through a deeper understanding of the standards that pupils need to reach in order to be successful in their next stage of learning. However, leaders have been less successful in ensuring that staff teach in ways that are appropriate for pupils' ages. We observed a number of pupils struggling to understand new mathematical concepts. Few teachers used models or images to represent complex thinking in simpler, pictorial format. Pupils were not always able, therefore, to link the abstract concepts being taught to the more concrete examples that they had already mastered.

Improvements to the early years are more noticeable. Staff across Nursery and Reception classes work well together to ensure that the learning environment is safe, supportive and stimulating. Particular attention has been paid to developing children's learning skills, such as the ability to persevere with a task or work cooperatively with friends. These are vital skills that, once secured, will stand children in good stead for the future. The time is now right to ensure that children's early reading, writing and mathematical skills are equally well developed so that they are guaranteed a strong start to their schooling.

Governors have managed the extended period of time it has taken to set up the new sponsor well. The chair of the governing board has been particularly influential in securing your own leadership and employing a new head of the lower school in the weeks between the acting headteacher leaving and the new sponsor taking over. This has ensured some much-needed stability for the future. However, the chair of the governing board is aware that the school's progress since March 2016 has not been rapid enough. This is in part because the board has not challenged leaders with sufficient rigour about the difference that chosen strategies are making to pupils' learning and progress.

In the 18 days since you and your head of school arrived, there have already been many changes. Staff commented to me on the change in pace that they had already noticed and the fact that they had received training, tried out the ideas in their classroom and been given useful feedback on their practice. This cycle of professional development and regular review now needs to embed so that it can have maximum impact on pupils' learning. You and the head of school both bring the sharp-mindedness, school improvement expertise and dogged determination required to move the school forward quickly. You both clearly understand the weaknesses that persist and the challenges you

face in addressing all of them in the short term. If the pace of change seen in the first three weeks of your appointments continues, the school has every chance of making up the lost ground of previous months.

External support

Staff are appreciative of the opportunity to work alongside their colleagues from the upper school, especially in subjects such as modern foreign languages and physical education. However, visits to other schools to observe good practice have not had the strong impact on teaching or outcomes that was desired. While teachers inevitably picked up new ways of working, these have not been evaluated fully in terms of the difference they are making to lower school pupils. Greater opportunities for collaboration, challenge and support across schools are imminent as the sponsorship of three schools, with yourself as executive headteacher, comes to fruition.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing board, the regional schools commissioner and the executive director, well-being and community health service, for Northumberland. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston
Her Majesty's Inspector