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4 November 2016

Becky Ford
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Dear Mrs Ford

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Somersham Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 13 October 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 that you and the interim head of school 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 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:

- address unevenness in teaching and learning across year groups and subjects in key stages 1 and 2
- develop the role and expertise of teaching assistants in supporting and promoting pupils' learning
- check the accuracy of teachers' assessments of pupils' learning across the full range of subjects
- ensure that there is more opportunity for pupils to reason mathematically and apply their mathematics to a variety of problems
- provide all subject leaders with training in how to check the quality of teaching and learning in the subjects that they are responsible for.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the interim head of school, a representative of the local authority, the chair and vice-chair of governors and two other governors to discuss the actions taken since the previous inspection. I also met with the coordinator for special educational needs, the early years leader and subject leaders of English and mathematics. I visited all classes with you and the interim head of school and in each class we looked at a small sample of pupils' written work across a range of subjects. The school's plans for improvement were evaluated. Self-evaluation of the school's performance was checked, together with records of monitoring of teaching and learning. The latest information about pupils' progress and attainment was scrutinised. The views of 81 parents who responded to Parent View (Ofsted's online survey) were taken into account.

Context

Following the previous inspection, the headteacher and deputy headteacher resigned. The local authority arranged for a series of temporary leaders to take over until permanent appointments could be made. In the meantime, the governing body took the decision to formally federate Somersham with two other local primary schools, St Helen's and Holywell, from 1 September 2016. As a consequence, the governing body was dissolved and a new, single governing body has been elected to govern all three schools. An executive headteacher has been appointed to lead on the strategic direction of all three schools. Each school has a separate head of school responsible for the day-to-day running of the school. The interim head of school is contracted from June until December. Recruitment for a permanent head of school is under way.

Since the previous inspection six teachers and four teaching assistants have left the school. One higher-level teaching assistant has been appointed and four new teachers joined the school in September. The school is fully staffed.

Main findings

During the spring term 2016 and the first half of the summer term, work to address recommendations from the previous inspection was slow. Temporary leaders made a start in moving the school forward but the approach lacked cohesion due to the number of leaders involved. From June, when the interim head of school took over, the pace of change has speeded up. Your appointment as a leader with a proven track record of successful leadership has strengthened the school's capacity even further and school improvement is gathering momentum promisingly. Good work has already been achieved in improving communication with parents. As a group, most parents have been very supportive and loyal to the school during a difficult period of change. For example, 81 responses in Parent View show that the majority would recommend the school to another parent.

You, and the head of school, are addressing the areas for improvement in the right order. You have taken swift action to improve pupils' behaviour. The new behaviour policy is achieving its intended impact because it is being implemented consistently across the school. From Reception through to Year 6, we saw pupils who were keen and ready to learn, whether they were working on their own, with other pupils, in small groups or with an adult. Pupils are responding well to the new 'good to be green' policy that promotes good behaviour throughout the day. As a result, the number of incidents that are referred directly to the head of school have reduced significantly. Pupils' spiritual and cultural development has also improved through the promotion of strong values in the curriculum. This was a weakness identified in the previous inspection. You and the head of school are resolute in your aim to create a welcoming school that provides pupils and staff with clean, attractive spaces for learning and good-quality resources to work with. You communicate high expectations for pupils to achieve well and take pride in all that they do. These high expectations are being mirrored by other staff and it is apparent in some, but not all, pupils' books that many are taking pride in their written work.

Importantly, you have introduced a new system for assessing and recording where pupils are in gaining understanding and knowledge in English and mathematics in relation to the national curriculum expectations for each year group. Teachers have received training in how to use it. This has enabled them to evaluate where pupils are and plan future learning on what they already know and can do. You have wisely built in opportunities for teachers to check that their judgements are accurate at regular intervals to ensure that their assessment is accurate. Teachers are now in a stronger position to tailor provision to the needs of different groups of pupils in English and mathematics than they were at the previous inspection. This practice does not extend to all other subjects.

Your records of monitoring teaching and learning show that it is variable in quality. It is improving rapidly – consistently good in some classes but not yet in all classes. The information you have gathered about pupils' learning confirms this. You have a strategy to move this forward quickly. You and other leaders are monitoring teaching and learning in English and mathematics rigorously. Staff are receiving regular feedback about their performance from your monitoring and the system for appraising their performance that you have introduced. You have set ambitious targets for pupils' progress with a view that anything less than expected progress is unacceptable. You have identified that teachers' lack of subject knowledge contributed to the poor outcomes for pupils' progress and attainment in reading, writing and mathematics in 2016 end of key stage 2 tests. The local authority has issued a warning notice to this effect. In response, you have arranged training for teachers to get to grips with the 2014 national curriculum requirements. Teachers' comments in pupils' written work are generally useful in signposting what they need to do to improve. Pupils are taking notice of it and learning from it. Most of the mathematics work seen in pupils' books shows a lack of emphasis on reasoning and problem-solving.

The school's plans for improvement rightly prioritise raising the achievement of disadvantaged pupils, the most able and the most able who are also disadvantaged. You and other leaders are tracking the progress of these groups closely. You have revised the role of the special needs coordinator to include overseeing the work and training for teaching assistants who frequently work with disadvantaged pupils. This work is due to start imminently. Governors are acutely aware of their responsibility to check that the pupil premium is well spent and that it makes a discernible difference to disadvantaged pupils' learning. The majority of the newly elected governors are experienced and knowledgeable about their roles and responsibilities. They know what needs to be done to move the school forward quickly and, importantly, they know how to do it. Leaders and governors have the necessary skills and show determination to move this school forward rapidly.

External support

The school is benefiting from a range of external support from local authority advisers and school to school support through the federation. The local authority acknowledges that due to the turbulence the school has experienced at senior leadership level, the school has needed, and will continue to require, considerable support until improvements are secure. Advisory support for early years has had a significant impact in improving provision since the previous inspection. We saw busy, productive learning in the Reception classes, both inside and outdoors. Children were intrigued and enchanted by the broad range of exciting activities to choose from with early writing skills clearly a focus for learning. The English and mathematics advisers are supporting the new leaders in raising pupils' achievement. Another adviser is working closely with two teachers who are showing potential to improve their skills rapidly. Most importantly, the federation brings with it a wealth of opportunities for staff to share and experience good practice at first hand and this is helping them to aim high in their own practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda Killman
Her Majesty's Inspector