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30 November 2016

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Dear Liam Murtagh

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thropton Village First School

Following my visit to your school on 11 November 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 December 2015. 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 recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- strengthen the quality of school improvement planning by including measureable milestones for each action and by delineating clearly who is going to carry out the improvement actions, monitor their completion and evaluate their impact
- ensure that leaders judge the progress made by groups of pupils, such as the most able and disadvantaged, when they check pupils' work
- provide further training in phonics for teachers and teaching assistants
- establish a consistent approach to handwriting across the school
- improve further the provision for children in the early years so that all adults are confident and proficient in leading the learning of children.

Evidence

During the inspection, discussions were held with the executive headteacher, other

senior leaders, pupils, the governing body and a representative of the local authority, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school action plans and other documents were evaluated. You accompanied me on a learning walk around the school to look at teaching and learning in classes, together with the progress and standards in pupils' books. I also checked the school's single central record and recruitment processes in respect of staff new to the school since the previous inspection. I took account of 37 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, together with three letters from parents that I received during the inspection.

Context

There have been a number of changes in staff since the section 5 inspection at which the school was judged to require improvement. The workforce was remodelled and a teacher gained the newly-created position of assistant headteacher. Three teachers and two teaching assistants resigned and left the school. Two newly qualified teachers, a teaching assistant and an office administrator joined the staff. The coordinator for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SENCO), business manager, office manager and site manager are shared with Dr Thomlinson Church of England Middle School.

In addition, the chair of governors and two other governors resigned. There is one vacancy on the governing body at the present time.

The number of pupils on the school's roll has reduced from 57 to 44.

Main findings

Leaders have ensured that parents have been and are fully involved in the school's improvement journey. For example, parents helped to form the school's new mission statement. As a result, parents are overwhelmingly positive about the school, its leaders and the staff.

Leaders' roles and responsibilities in relation to English, mathematics, computing, modern foreign languages, the early years and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities are now clearly defined and understood. The leadership of other subject areas, such as music and history, requires clarification and improvement. Leaders have checked pupils' work to ensure that their presentation is of an acceptable standard and that teachers feed back to pupils in accordance with the school's policies. They do not check to ensure that all groups of pupils, such as the most able and disadvantaged, are making rapid progress.

On arrival, the experienced SENCO from Dr Tomlinson Church of England Middle School, carried out a full audit of the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. She led staff training and took rapid action to ensure that pupils' needs were correctly identified, that they accessed appropriate

support and that their progress was checked regularly. As a result, the provision for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is much improved.

The school's assessment policy, which was introduced in the month prior to the last inspection, is now becoming embedded. Pupils' attainment in reading, writing, mathematics, science and French is measured on a half-termly basis. Their progress is examined and challenged during formal pupil progress meetings. Intervention activities are planned for pupils whose progress is judged not good enough.

Governance is improving. An external review of governance had been commissioned prior to the last inspection. Governors work in accordance with the external review of governance action plan. They support the executive headteacher well and their challenge is beginning to have more bite.

Leaders have reduced the number of classes from three to two. Nursery, Reception and Year 1 pupils are based in the 'piglets' class, while Year 2, 3 and 4 pupils are based in the 'adventurers' class. Pupils have been taught in small ability groups for reading and phonics since the beginning of the current academic year. On occasion, pupils' progress in phonics is not as fast as it could be, because staff do not pronounce letter sounds correctly. Teachers do not ensure that the transition between ability groups and class teaching groups happens in a timely manner. Pupils waste too much valuable learning time waiting for others to arrive and depart.

Provision in the early years, although much improved, is variable. Some staff require further training to ensure that they are confident when leading the learning of groups of children during small group time, especially at times when phonics and guided reading are in progress throughout the school. Parents have contributed online to their children's baseline assessments. The local authority has agreed to validate the accuracy of all of the baseline assessments. This is so that leaders, including governors, have a firm foundation on which to base their judgements of pupils' progress during this academic year.

Teachers' planning now includes more opportunities for pupils to read and write at length across the curriculum. Some of the pupils do not appreciate having to write at length. They told the inspector that writing is 'too hard'. They have not yet built up their stamina for writing at length.

A comprehensive professional development programme for teachers and teaching assistants was implemented immediately after the last inspection. However, due to turbulence in staffing, this failed to have lasting impact. Current staff have bought into leaders' higher expectations and are eager to attend training, hone their skills and ensure that pupils make rapid progress.

Pupils are proud and happy to attend Thropton Village First School. The way they present their work has improved, but their handwriting lags behind age-related

expectations. Pupils have a thorough knowledge of online safety. Their understanding of different faiths and cultures is deepening because the curriculum has been improved to include a rich diet of visits and visitors.

External support

The local authority provided initial and challenging support immediately after the school was judged to require improvement in December 2015. This same level of challenge is still required to support the newly qualified teachers and new leaders in school. The local authority has agreed to support leaders' monitoring and evaluation of the early years until all judge the provision to be good.

The school improvement partner has a very realistic view of the school which is based on her first-hand observations of the school at work. Her reports to governors are honest and uncompromising.

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

Yours sincerely

Belita Scott
Her Majesty's Inspector