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Mrs Lucie Phelps
Victoria Infant and Nursery School
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Dear Mrs Phelps

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Victoria Infant and Nursery School

Following my visit to your school on 9 March 2017, 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 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:

- make governors aware of the full range of published performance information available
- improve attendance for all pupils, particularly disadvantaged pupils
- give pupils more opportunities to practise and improve their writing and to reason and problem-solve in mathematics
- develop the role of subject leaders.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the assistant headteacher, early years leaders and a group of teachers. I also met with the acting chair and

another member of the governing body. I spoke with a representative of the local authority by telephone. You and I visited every class to observe pupils at work and look at their books. I evaluated your action plan and considered other evidence, including the 2016 validated outcomes for pupils and achievement information for pupils currently at the school. I met with two pupils to discuss their work.

Context

Since the inspection in March 2016, there has been a change in leadership. One of the assistant headteachers, who was also responsible for mathematics, resigned recently from her leadership role. Two teachers, including the special educational needs coordinator, are currently on maternity leave. Both the chair and vice-chair of the governing body resigned recently. A number of other governors have also left since the inspection. A member of the governing body has stepped up to the role of acting chair.

Main findings

By your own admission, the judgements made by inspectors in March 2016 came as a shock to you, your staff and governors. However, you quickly picked yourselves up and 'tucked the past away'. Your work since March 2016 is making a difference because you are not content to opt for quick-fix solutions. Instead, you are making changes which are getting to the heart of the matter. You have made sure that your action plan has clear targets. Senior leaders and governors check frequently on progress. You keep your action plan evaluation simple so that everyone can see at a glance what has been completed and what needs to be done next.

All teachers are now meeting the minimum standards you set for them. The robust performance management system that you have put in place ensures that teachers understand fully the school's priorities and their individual roles and responsibilities. Teachers consistently follow the school's agreed marking policy. Teachers make sure that pupils are clear how to improve their work. However, the tasks that teachers set are not moving pupils' learning on quickly enough. Too often, teachers miss opportunities to set pupils more demanding tasks and do not set high enough expectations for what their pupils can achieve in lessons. Moreover, pupils, including the most able, do not have enough opportunities to solve increasingly sophisticated problems and explain their thinking in mathematics. You know that this is an area for improvement which you need to address urgently, and have started to put plans in place to achieve this improvement.

You acted swiftly following the 2016 key stage 1 assessments. You recognised that decisive action needed to be taken to improve outcomes in reading and writing. The assistant headteacher has put in place strategies to improve pupils' stamina in reading. Pupils told me that they enjoy the tricky comprehension activities set by teachers. Pupils and staff enjoyed the visit by the well-known children's author, Wes Magee, which you arranged. This visit inspired everyone to write. However, day to

day, pupils need more opportunities to write at length to develop their stamina and practise their skills. During my visit, we also talked about the need for teachers to spend more time working alongside pupils to help them refine and improve their writing.

Governors have taken 'a long, hard look' at themselves following the inspection. They took heed of the inspector's recommendation for an external review. Following the review in June, governors drew up a comprehensive action plan. This plan has helped governors to prioritise the weaknesses highlighted by the review. The chair and vice-chair of the governing body both resigned recently. A number of other governors also stood down. New governors have brought with them skills, expertise and experience which are already making a positive difference to the levels of support and challenge to you and your colleagues. The acting chair has taken up the reins and is keen to make sure that governors step up to the mark. Although governors have received training to enable them to make better use of published performance data, they have not been made aware of the full range of information available to governors. This is hampering governors' ability to pinpoint weaknesses and formulate searching questions to challenge you about the school's performance. Furthermore, governors have not ensured that they check policies' accuracy closely enough before ratification nor have they made sure the information published on the school's website complies fully with the School Information Regulations.

Your teachers have agreed what pupils should be able to do in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of each academic year. Teachers are tracking pupils' learning closely to ensure that pupils will reach these agreed standards. Teachers can now give you up-to-date information about pupils' achievement. You are making good use of this information to make sure that your pupils achieve at least as well as other pupils nationally.

Leaders of the early years have paid heed to the inspection findings. They have worked together to put in place the improvements needed. The early years indoor and outdoor areas have been transformed. Early years staff are increasing the amount of meaningful print in the different areas. The teachers have placed much greater emphasis on planning opportunities for children to develop early literacy and mathematical skills so they are better prepared for key stage 1. This is already making a positive difference to the outcomes for children. The early years leaders have made sure that they have an accurate understanding of children's abilities when they join the settings. Teachers have started to use an online tool to help them consistently assess children's learning across the classes. The leaders of the early years are not complacent. They know that there is further room for improvement if the provision is going to deliver a consistently good standard of education for the youngest children.

While there is much to celebrate about the positive changes at Victoria since the inspection, there is still much to do. Your subject leaders have developed action plans. However, despite the enthusiasm of these leaders, they are only just off the

starting blocks and have had limited influence on teaching so far. We agreed how important it is for these teachers to step up and take greater ownership for improvement alongside clear lines of accountability. This will build capacity and ease the load on senior leaders' shoulders.

Last academic year, rates of overall absence and persistent absence increased. In addition, disadvantaged pupils had higher rates of absence than other pupils. Senior leaders and governors have not given this issue the urgent attention it requires, particularly given that the progress of disadvantaged pupils lagged behind that of other pupils last year. I am heartened that governors have already commissioned an external review of the school's use of the pupil premium.

Your information on pupils currently attending Victoria Infant and Nursery School shows an improving picture. More pupils are making the progress that they should and standards in reading, writing and mathematics are rising. However, there is more to do if pupils, including the disadvantaged and the most able, are to make progress similar to those pupils with similar starting points nationally.

External support

You have made extensive use of the support available from the local authority. A local authority officer has brokered a support package matched to your needs in partnership with the local teaching school alliance. A local authority officer has supported governors to commission their external review, deliver training and develop their action plan.

Although you, your governors and staff have found the training and support you have received so far helpful, sometimes you have found the advice you are given contradictory and not always completely suited to your needs. Recently, you have successfully bid for additional funding which has enabled you and your chair of the governing body, local authority officer and representative from the teaching school alliance to plan the next phase of training and support more carefully. The six-weekly reviews of this plan will help to ensure that the support and training continue to meet your needs and have a direct impact on outcomes for pupils.

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

Yours sincerely

Pippa Jackson Maitland
Her Majesty's Inspector