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Mrs Catherine Markham
St Columba's Catholic Primary School
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Dear Mrs Markham

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Columba's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 18 July 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 November 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in November 2016, 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:

- sharpen its plans for improvement further so that the expected impact of actions is consistently and explicitly set out
- ensure that attendance continues to improve so that no group's or individual's progress and success are hampered by weak attendance

- ensure that the remaining inconsistencies in teaching and learning, particularly in key stage 2, continue to be rigorously and promptly addressed so that all pupils make the progress that they should, through the school ensuring that:
 - all staff, both teachers and teaching assistants, have the highest expectations of what their pupils can do
 - pupils have more opportunities to write at greater length in subjects other than English.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, the head of the school, two middle leaders, members of the governing body, an officer from Bradford local authority and the director of education for the Catholic diocese of Leeds to discuss the actions that you have taken since the previous inspection. I also evaluated the school's action plans and other relevant documents. Three Year 5 pupils showed me around the school and I visited a range of classrooms. I also spoke more formally with a group of Year 4 pupils to discuss their attitudes to school.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the temporary role of the executive headteacher and that of head of school have been confirmed by governors for a further two years. In addition, a number of staff have left the school, and new appointments have been made. The roles and responsibilities of middle leaders have been reassigned.

Main findings

Governors and leaders are effectively addressing the key areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. Your whole-school and subject plans contain the necessary timescales, responsibilities and resource allocations. You have carefully prioritised what needs to be done. However, the expected positive impact of some of the proposed actions in the school's plans are not set out in sufficient detail to make it clear what success looks like.

Governors are now checking the work of the school more frequently. You and the head of school have worked with governors to increase their capacity and ability to hold you to account for the actions you are taking to improve the school. The governing body has restructured its work so that there is now a firm focus on the quality of teaching and its impact on learning. The notes and minutes of governing body meetings reveal a well-informed body, determined to improve the school. Governors now visit the school in a purposeful way and report their findings in detail.

Your monitoring timetable shows clearly when activities are due to take place and

who is responsible for carrying them out. These activities include lesson observations, checks on pupils' books and learning walks. The activities have a specific focus taken from one of the actions in your plans. After a monitoring activity, feedback is given promptly to teachers so they are fully aware of their strengths and areas for development. You then check to ensure that teachers have improved their practice in these development areas. Outcomes from these monitoring activities are shared with the governing body. Consequently, governors have a deepening knowledge of the school, its strengths and areas for development.

You have strengthened the quality and effectiveness of leadership. Subject and phase leaders are enthusiastic, knowledgeable and growing in confidence as a result of your actions and those of the head of school. Middle leaders work with you to ensure the accuracy of teachers' judgements about how well pupils are doing. They meet regularly with members of staff and with staff at other schools in the local 'cluster' to assure the quality of judgements. Middle leaders have an accurate overview of how well groups of pupils, including disadvantaged pupils and the most able pupils, are performing in each class. As a result, it is clear which pupils are making good progress and which require extra support.

There is clear evidence of improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in Reception and key stage 1. Pupils' outcomes have been predicted with growing confidence by staff as a result of careful training and more collaborative working within the school and across the cluster of schools. Both the local authority and the diocese have effectively supported this work. While there is evidence of improvement in key stage 2, there is more to be done in this part of the school because of the legacy of weaker teaching here. This past weakness has meant that there are still gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding that need to be addressed. Linked to this, teaching has not given pupils sufficient opportunities to study in depth. You are addressing this. For example, teachers and teaching assistants are using questioning more expertly to challenge and deepen pupils' thinking. During the inspection, staff were observed developing pupils' understanding through challenging questioning that focused on the 'how' and the 'why' rather than the more mundane 'what'.

You are effectively developing the roles of teaching assistants. Their roles and responsibilities are now clearer. You have introduced more careful processes for managing their performance. You are also improving the part they play in monitoring pupils' progress so that they can have a more robust input into the planning of teaching activities.

New daily reading sessions have had a positive impact on pupils' attainment and progress. Pupils are taught explicitly how to infer, deduce and predict from various texts. As a result, pupils' comprehension skills have improved. Pupils told me that they enjoy reading and take pleasure in developing their skills as readers.

You have acted effectively to improve pupils' writing across the school. There are now leaders in each key stage who have a particular focus on improving the quality of pupils' skills in writing. They lead training for groups of staff in developing their skills and planning writing activities. Pupils now have more opportunities to write in a range of ways to suit a range of purposes and audiences. This is particularly the case in English lessons. Inspection evidence shows that, although pupils are writing at greater length and developing their ideas and skills in this subject, they do not have enough opportunities to write at length in other areas of the curriculum. In addition, although staff are clearly following the school's assessment and feedback policy, it is not clear how the marking of spelling is helping pupils to learn to spell.

You have put in place a number of strategies to improve attendance. Letters and text messages are sent to parents and you expect them to explain unauthorised absences. The attendance improvement officer works closely with families, making home visits and encouraging parents to send their children to school regularly. Rewards are given to those individuals and classes who attend regularly. Pupils told me that they welcome and like this. Consequently, current attendance information indicates that attendance rates have improved since last year, and they are now very close to national averages.

External support

The leadership and governance of the school are effectively supported by the Catholic diocese of Leeds, which has supported the executive headteacher and head of school roles. The diocese, through the Leeds Teaching Alliance has also provided effective support in developing writing across the school. The more local Catholic Schools Partnership has provided good-quality training and support for newly qualified and recently qualified teachers, as well as successful training for middle leaders. Bradford local authority has provided detailed support in assuring the accuracy of the school's judgements about the progress of early years children. The authority has also worked effectively with the school to confirm key stage 2 writing outcomes. Officers from both the Catholic diocese of Leeds and the local authority play an active role with leaders and governors in monitoring the impact of the school's actions.

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

Yours sincerely

Mark Evans

Her Majesty's Inspector