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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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Mrs Phyllis King
Executive Headteacher
Southam St James (Voluntary Aided) CofE Primary School
Tollgate Road
Southam
Warwickshire
West Midlands
CV47 1EE

Dear Mrs King

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Southam St James (Voluntary Aided) CofE Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 13 September 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 September 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:

- ensure that teachers check on pupils' learning more regularly during lessons so that they can move their learning on when appropriate, particularly in the case of the most able pupils
- ensure that monitoring arrangements are more explicit in development plans so that governors can hold leaders to account for outcomes more rigorously
- implement the improvement plan for boys' writing and ensure that the subsequent outcomes are carefully monitored by leaders and governors.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the executive headteacher, head of school, subject leader for mathematics, pupils and governors to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. The school improvement plan was evaluated and visits were made to all classes in key stage 2 and to one Year 1 class. I evaluated a wide range of documents, including governors' documentation and outcomes from monitoring activities. A range of pupils' books were reviewed.

Context

Since the inspection in September 2016, one teacher has left the school and a new teacher started in January 2017. A new foundation governor was appointed in the spring term 2017 and a new parent governor joined the governing body in September 2016.

Main findings

You and the head of school have been quick to act on the areas for improvement identified at the school's last section 5 inspection. You, ably supported by the head of school, have implemented a range of effective strategies to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. Leaders have developed various action plans which address the right priorities based on careful self-evaluation. Leaders regularly revisit action plans to determine how successful they have been in meeting intended outcomes. However, sometimes the arrangements for, and the exact focus of, monitoring are too vague. This makes it harder for governors to check on how well plans are progressing. Consequently, governors' ability to hold leaders to account for their actions has less rigour. Despite this, governors are very active in school and show a passion for raising standards and supporting the school to improve. They have a clear view of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching.

Since September 2016, the head of school has had an increasing amount of time to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching, allowing any emerging priorities to be quickly identified. You and other leaders keep a close check on teaching and offer practical advice and guidance to teachers on what more they can do to improve. You have rightly focused on aspects to do with challenge, pupils' progress and the most able pupils. You have prioritised staff training and development to ensure that all teachers are well equipped with the skills, knowledge and understanding to teach effectively.

There has been a strong focus on ensuring that work is matched more closely to pupils' abilities. Teachers routinely build various levels of difficulty into learning tasks which are now challenging more pupils. In some subjects, including mathematics, pupils are often given the choice to select work at their own level of difficulty. However, there is still further work to be done to stretch the most able

pupils. This is because sometimes teachers do not check frequently enough on how well pupils are progressing during the lesson. As a result, some pupils are not moved on quickly enough to harder work when they are capable of achieving more.

The teaching of mathematics is improving. The subject leader has begun to develop his leadership skills and now offers guidance and support to other teachers. For example, he has led training on introducing more reasoning opportunities in mathematics. The work in pupils' books demonstrates that this training is having a positive impact. However, provisional 2017 national assessment data shows that a lower percentage of pupils achieved the expected standard in mathematics at the end of both key stage 1 and key stage 2 in comparison to the previous year. The mathematics leader has an understanding of the reasons for this and is currently revising his action plan to take account of where further improvements are needed. Observations of key stage 2 pupils at work in lessons confirm that the improvement strategies that have been put in place are making a positive difference and helping to increase the rate of progress for current pupils.

You have arranged training on teaching grammar for teachers and teaching assistants, which has helped ensure that pupils are now being taught the correct age-appropriate grammar. You have identified that there are some remaining issues with spelling and are actively addressing this. Where pupils' grammar skills have been weak, you have provided additional grammar lessons. In the pupils' books that I reviewed, most teachers had consistently responded to spelling, grammar and punctuation errors in their marking, consistent with the school's marking policy. These aspects of pupils' writing have improved across the school. However, you have recently identified that boys are lagging behind girls in writing. You have an appropriate action plan in place to address this issue, although have not yet had time to check on how well this is making a difference to the quality of boys' writing.

Pupils are assessed regularly and this information is used to inform teachers' planning. You have developed a sound assessment system to track and monitor pupils' progress. This system is now embedded and provides leaders and governors with useful information about the overall progress of pupils and that of groups. Leaders use this information, in addition to information from drop-in visits to lessons and scrutiny of teachers' planning, to inform the next steps in school improvement planning. For example, you identified the need to increase pupils' reading stamina and introduced a range of initiatives to work towards achieving this. The Year 6 pupils spoke to me enthusiastically about their online 'book blog' which enables them to share with others comments about their favourite books.

You told me that the teaching of phonics in key stage 1 has significantly improved. It is taught daily and builds successfully on pupils' prior learning. My observations confirm that the teaching is lively and engaging, and pupils respond well. Provisional 2017 results indicate that almost all Year 1 pupils attained the expected standard in phonics at the end of Year 1 in 2017.

Leaders have a realistic view of what needs to be achieved in order for the school to become good. Their analysis of outcomes for 2017 recognises where improvements are needed. Despite the provisional results for Year 6 showing a slight dip in progress between the end of key stage 1 and key stage 2, internal tracking data shows that key stage 2 pupils overall made good progress in reading and mathematics over the last academic year. Progress in writing was reasonable, although you acknowledge that there is further work to do, particularly in relation to boys' writing.

External support

The local authority has offered limited support to the school. They have held termly task group meetings to consider the school's progress towards being judged as 'good' at its next inspection. A local authority adviser has provided some external support with a scrutiny of pupils' work.

You have commissioned appropriate support from private consultants and acted on their advice. This has helped to improve subject leaders' expertise and enabled them to identify and prioritise actions that will make the most difference to improving pupils' outcomes. You have also benefited from support offered by the local consortium of schools.

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

Yours sincerely

Tim Hill
Her Majesty's Inspector