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11 October 2017

Kathryn Bishop-Horsfield
St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School, Bacup
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Dear Mrs Bishop-Horsfield

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of St Mary's Roman Catholic Primary School, Bacup

Following my visit to your school on 10 October 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in June 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, governors and a representative of the local authority. Meetings were also held with parents and pupils. The local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

There have been significant changes in staffing since the previous inspection. Apart from support staff, only the headteacher and one member of teaching staff remain. In September 2017, the school appointed two new assistant headteachers and four other new teachers. There are new subject leaders in post. There are plans for the school to join the Blessed John Henry Newman Trust in the near future.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

St Mary's is on the road to recovery. New staff are working together in order to do the best for the pupils. Leaders are keen to raise ambitions and drive further improvements.

The comprehensive plans for development have underpinned recent improvements and the foundations for further success are in place. No one is under any illusion that the improvement journey will be easy or swift. Essential management procedures, such as a fit-for-purpose assessment system, and a clear understanding of what good teaching looks like at St Mary's need time to embed. The necessary changes to staffing, plus some staffing changes beyond your control, have hampered progress in the past. You and your governors have worked hard to ensure that a stable staffing structure is now in place. New teachers have a much clearer understanding of effective teaching and learning and a firm commitment to the future of the school.

Leaders work collaboratively with other local schools. This sharing of expertise is helping to drive improvement further. The newly appointed subject leaders have begun to work on their areas for development in collaboration with other leaders from local schools.

All staff currently in post share a desire for pupils to achieve well. Teachers new to post have gained a good understanding of the needs of the pupils in a relatively short space of time. Teachers recognise that the legacy of weak teaching and underachievement means that there are challenges ahead. Leaders' close checks on teaching, plus helpful advice and guidance, mean that teachers know what they need to do to improve their practice. However, the majority of staff are newly appointed and this guidance has not had time to take effect fully.

An external review of governance, which you commissioned, has helped to bring about some changes to the governing body. Structures have been reviewed and roles have been clarified. Governors are playing to their strengths and putting their expertise to good use. Governors are beginning to use their increased understanding of data to challenge leaders more effectively.

A review of the pupil premium spending, which took place in January 2017, has had a positive impact. Governors now measure the impact of this spending much more carefully. They challenge leaders effectively about the outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. The newly appointed special educational needs coordinator has reviewed the support and interventions in place for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders use, more effectively than they did previously, the new tracking system to check on the progress of disadvantaged pupils and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, the use of this new system is in its early stages.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have put in place additional strategies to improve attendance. These strategies have helped to improve overall rates of attendance. Overall attendance has improved and attendance in 2017 was in line with national averages. However, despite leaders' best efforts, some disadvantaged pupils still do not attend school as often as they should. This lack of attendance is hampering their progress.

Work in pupils' books shows clear improvements in presentation. Books are neat and tidy and pupils demonstrate a pride in their work. Pupils are keen to do well and are proud of

their achievements. Pupils know that they are making progress because they 'can't do something one day but can do it the next'.

Parents are supportive of the school and recognise the improvements you have made. Parents and pupils value the happy atmosphere you have created.

While there have been many improvements, some of the weaknesses that caused the school to be judged as having serious weaknesses at the last inspection still remain. During the inspection, you agreed with the concerns that I raised and have already begun to address some of these concerns. Teachers' expectations of what the most able pupils can achieve are not high enough. Consequently, these pupils do not receive sufficient challenge in lessons. Disadvantaged pupils' attainment remains below that of other pupils nationally. However, this difference is diminishing.

Pupils' outcomes in mathematics, including those for disadvantaged pupils, at the end of key stage 2 have declined. Leaders had identified this as an issue and additional work has already begun. In mathematics, current pupils have a much better understanding of basic calculation skills. This will now enable them to tackle mathematics at a higher standard. However, pupils spend too much time repeating basic calculations, which they already can do, rather than moving on to deepen their understanding through investigations and problem-solving. There are few opportunities for pupils to investigate numbers and number patterns or to explain their mathematical thinking. This hampers their progress towards the higher standard.

The focus last year on reading has paid dividends. There are promising signs of pupils making stronger progress in reading in key stage 2 than in the past. However, this is only beginning to make a small dent in the legacy of underachievement. Currently, a much greater proportion of pupils than previously are reading at the standards expected for their age. However, few pupils are reading at the higher standard. Planned work to increase the progress of the most able pupils is detailed in your plans for improvement.

The proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard at the end of key stage 1, in reading and in mathematics, has declined. These proportions are well below the national averages. In 2016 and 2017, disadvantaged pupils did not perform as well as others nationally in reading and mathematics. However, the attainment of disadvantaged pupils in key stage 1 in 2017 improved from 2016. The difference between these pupils and others nationally is diminishing in reading and mathematics.

Pupils' outcomes in the phonics screening check in Year 1 dipped in 2017. Too few disadvantaged pupils reach the expected standard. However, leaders' actions to ensure that those pupils who did not reach the expected standard at the end of Year 1 catch up are having a good effect. Consequently, more pupils leave Year 2 with a sufficient understanding of phonics to make a positive transition to key stage 2. Where pupils have not reached the expected standard by the end of Year 2, leaders have developed additional opportunities to help pupils to catch up in Year 3. It is too early to see the impact of this.

Outcomes for pupils in grammar, punctuation and spelling are low. Many pupils are not working at the standards expected for their age. Spelling is particularly weak. The newly appointed English subject leader has comprehensive plans in place to ensure that this aspect is taught consistently across school. However, it is too early to see the impact of this.

Although improving, the standard of pupils' writing across school is below that of others nationally. Many pupils are not working at the standards expected for their age. You acknowledge that pupils do not have enough opportunities to write independently or at length. The work in pupils' books varies in different classes. In some classes, teachers give pupils opportunities to write at length and there is a clear build-up in the writing process. In some classes, pupils' writing consists of copying the teacher's work.

Despite some gains, pupils in Year 6 continue to have gaps in their learning because of poor teaching in the past. Consequently, standards remain low and too few pupils are likely to start secondary school with the skills and knowledge they need.

The local authority is delivering its planned actions effectively to support the school during this challenging period. Officers from the local authority are keeping abreast of the school's progress. They are meeting with leaders frequently, attending meetings of the governing body and offering support to improve teaching. Their support and challenge is welcomed and valued by school leaders.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Tanya Hughes
Her Majesty's Inspector