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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Ms Louisa Morris
Headteacher
St Mary's Church of England Primary School
Brampton Road
Melton Mowbray
Leicestershire
LE13 0NA

Dear Ms Morris

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 7 December 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 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in March 2017, the school was also judged to require improvement.

Senior leaders and the trust 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:

- continue to develop strategies to improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils
- embed strategies already in place to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the deputy headteacher and middle leaders. I also met with members of the local governing body and a representative from the Diocese of Leicester Academies Trust (DLAT) to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school's action plan and

discussed the school's progress towards achieving its aims with senior leaders. Together with the deputy headteacher, you and I visited all classes. I spoke to pupils about their work and looked at their books to evaluate the quality of their learning. I reviewed documents relating to the school's monitoring activities, including reviews undertaken by the trust and external consultants. I also looked at the school's single central record. I met formally with a group of pupils to ascertain their views on school life and their learning.

Context

Since the last inspection, there have been no changes to the leadership or governance of the school. However, shortly before the previous inspection, there were a number of changes to the senior and middle leadership teams in the school.

Main findings

You have established a culture of aspiration and a desire for success. Ably supported by your deputy headteacher, you have maintained and built on the improvements that were evident at the time of the last inspection. You have shared high expectations of both staff and pupils. Staff are passionate about supporting pupils to succeed and pupils are keen to do well. There is a shared sense of determination for both academic success and personal flourish.

Immediately following the last inspection, you worked with senior leaders, school improvement officers from DLAT and governors to produce a clear and specific action plan. This identifies precise aims and the means by which to achieve them. It also identifies clear timescales, demonstrating an appropriate and realistic sense of urgency. You consider this document to be 'living' and, as such, you regularly review and update it. This means that you prioritise the key actions most pertinent to school improvement. You are utterly focused and maintain a strong sense of direction which is clearly articulated to staff.

Prior to the last inspection, you had already identified the need to develop assessment practices. You had begun to introduce new systems for assessing, accurately, pupils' progress. You have continued to strengthen practice in this area. For example, teachers moderate pupils' work both internally and with other schools. In addition, you have sought verification from DLAT school improvement officers. You have introduced assessment weeks, where all pupils undertake assessments at the same time. This has increased staff's and pupils' focus and consistency of practice. To underpin the work to improve accuracy of assessment, you have also introduced external standardised tests. This has ensured that any prior inaccuracies in assessment have been rectified.

You have raised expectations of what pupils are able to achieve. Pupils are set aspirational targets, based on their prior attainment, and you have instilled a culture where underperformance is not to be excused. You monitor pupils' progress closely

and you work hard to understand the reasons for any underperformance. You use this knowledge to intervene quickly so that pupils are supported to catch up and make rapid progress. You also make clear your expectation that pupils are challenged to achieve at the highest possible standard. You have provided opportunities for professional dialogue so that all staff understand pupils' needs and the plans to meet them. Teachers and teaching assistants liaise closely, sharing planning and reviewing learning. In the lessons we visited, teaching assistants were supporting pupils effectively.

The pupils' progress meetings that you introduced when you took up post in September 2016 have been considerably strengthened by the improvements in assessment practices. You are now able to track pupils' progress more accurately. These meetings scrutinise each pupil's progress in detail and gaps in their learning are identified. You agree what action class teachers need to take to address these gaps and monitor teachers' implementation of plans. Subsequent meetings review the impact of these actions and the next steps in pupils' learning.

English and mathematics leaders had been recently appointed at the time of the last inspection and were beginning to monitor and evaluate the quality of provision in these subject areas. These middle leaders now take considerable responsibility to drive improvements across the school. They have undertaken research and visited other schools to further develop their understanding and, as such, are extremely knowledgeable. These leaders have delivered whole-school training and worked with individual staff, for example by modelling teaching. They undertake a variety of monitoring activities, such as observing teaching and evaluating work in pupils' books.

Middle leaders have developed strategies to improve areas identified at the last inspection. For example, the English leader has introduced a detailed grid to assess pupils' writing. This enables teachers to evaluate what pupils can do, and also identifies the next steps in their learning. For example, the most able pupils are challenged to meet the expectations of the greater depth standard. These grids are shared with pupils who are then guided to improve their work. The marking and feedback policy also supports pupils to take responsibility for their own learning. For example, pupils self-edit and improve their work using the 'purple polishing-pen' strategy. Pupils enjoy this approach to learning and say that it helps them to make progress. This is evident in their workbooks.

Leaders have identified the need to improve pupils' spelling. In September 2017, you introduced a new approach to teaching spelling. Pupils are now taught spelling patterns explicitly. Your internal testing indicates that this is improving pupils' spelling abilities. You recognise that the next step is to support pupils to apply this learning in their writing.

Considerable work has been undertaken to improve the provision of mathematics. Two teachers, including the mathematics leader, have worked with specialists to

develop their own practice and to help them support others in school. They have been observed by a leading mathematics teacher who has provided them with feedback to support their development. This learning has been cascaded to all staff. In addition, they have delivered demonstration lessons to model good practice.

The trust has also provided support to improve the quality of teaching. For example, leaders attend network meetings and participate in working and research groups. The mathematics leaders have worked with a DLAT school improvement officer and benefited greatly from this support. You have also introduced a new approach to teaching mathematics across the school. There is now a clear focus on problem-solving and reasoning, which is interwoven into all aspects of mathematics provision. Work in pupils' books indicates that pupils are provided with frequent and regular opportunities to develop these skills. Leaders have also introduced a new strategy to aid pupils' rapid recall and mental mathematics. Pupils now participate in weekly skill tests which consolidate and refresh their learning. Pupils' performance in these tests demonstrates clear progress.

Both the English and mathematics leaders have had considerable impact on the quality of provision and the subsequent progress of pupils in these subjects.

You recognise the need to improve outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. You work with staff to ensure that this group of pupils' needs are met, both in lessons and beyond the classroom. You have introduced 'pupil premium advocates' – adults who champion disadvantaged pupils in all aspects of school life. For example, they monitor attendance and check that their needs are met in the classroom. They also ensure that pupils apply for pupil leadership posts, and encourage and support them to attend extra-curricular activities. A very large majority of disadvantaged pupils now regularly participate in the wider curriculum and the few, who do not, benefit from alternative enrichment activities during the school day.

The last inspection identified the need to improve pupils' attendance, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils. You meet regularly with the attendance officer who, in turn, continues to work with the families of those pupils who find it difficult to attend school regularly. You recognise your responsibility in challenging parents and have taken decisive action to do so where necessary. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils who are persistently absent from school has reduced considerably. However, disadvantaged pupils' attendance remains below the national average. You are aware that remedying this remains a priority.

Members of the local governing body continue to develop their understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, and they are clear about the school's priorities. Members are linked to specific aspects of the school's work, and they recognise and embrace their roles and responsibilities. For example, the member responsible for safeguarding has recently undertaken an audit of safeguarding arrangements in the school, including speaking to pupils and scrutinising the school's central record. The member who is linked to the pupil premium strategy meets regularly with you to

discuss the impact of additional funding. DLAT has provided training to support members of the local governing body to understand the school's performance data. Leaders are increasingly held to account and feel challenged.

External support

The trust commissions two reviews of the school's performance each year. The review conducted in October 2017 provided a detailed evaluation of work undertaken since the last inspection and identified the next steps necessary for further improvement. Leaders value this work. DLAT also commissioned a review of governance, and a review of the school's use of the pupil premium funding, as recommended by the last inspection. Both have been carried out in a timely manner. However, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this work.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the executive board, the director of education for the Diocese of Leicester, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Leicestershire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Deborah Mosley
Her Majesty's Inspector