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Mrs Catrin Jones
Interim Executive Headteacher
St Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Primary School
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TN37 6EU

Dear Mrs Jones

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 19 January 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the monitoring 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 monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received two successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

Senior leaders and the interim executive board (IEB) are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to:

- refocus leaders' attention on accelerating improvements in the quality of teaching so that teaching is at least good throughout the school
- ensure that assessment information is accurate and is used to inform teachers' planning by identifying the knowledge, skills and understanding that pupils need to develop to help them make rapid progress
- track the progress of pupils from their different starting points to ensure that those who have fallen behind are catching up and that the most able pupils are challenged consistently well
- secure strong substantive leadership of the school in the longer term.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with: the interim executive headteacher and interim head of school; other members of the leadership team; and four members of the IEB, including the chair of the board. I also held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority and met with a representative of the diocese. The school improvement plan and self-evaluation summary were evaluated.

Together with you and other leaders I visited classrooms to observe learning and speak to pupils about their work. I also looked at pupils' books to evaluate the progress that they were making. I scrutinised a wide range of school documentation including the single central record of recruitment checks.

Context

Shortly after the previous inspection in October 2016 the local authority issued the school with a warning notice. An IEB has been in place since March 2017, replacing the previous governing body. The substantive headteacher left her post at the end of August 2017. The school is currently led by an interim executive headteacher and an interim head of school from the local authority who each work three days a week at the school. A new leader responsible for pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities and also disadvantaged pupils joined the school in September 2017. There have been other changes to staffing. Year 3 pupils do not currently have a substantive class teacher. The bursar is currently absent.

Main findings

Despite the best efforts of the assistant headteacher and middle leaders, progress in making improvements to the quality of teaching following the previous inspection was initially very slow. However, focused work with pupils in Year 2 and Year 6 improved outcomes in many of the 2017 national assessments.

The formation of an IEB in March 2017 and your subsequent appointment with the interim head of school in September 2017 have both served to increase the pace of improvement. Both the board and the leaders have a strong moral purpose and a determination to make rapid improvements.

The tenacious work of the IEB members, led by an extremely competent chair, has uncovered much that was wrong with the school and needed to be put right quickly. The board has ensured that the pace of change has been swift and that all actions taken by leaders will lead to sustained improvements rather than being just quick fixes.

As part of the new interim leadership, you have also uncovered and tackled further weaknesses in safeguarding, budget overspends, and statutory policies and procedures that were not in place. You have had to spend a great deal of time putting these important things in place to ensure that pupils are safe, that staff are

treated fairly and held to account, and that all statutory responsibilities are met. You have completed a thorough audit of safeguarding procedures and developed a system to monitor patterns in behaviour. Behaviour and attendance are both improving because of your effective action. As a result of having had to spend time addressing the more systematic weaknesses, you have had less time than you would have liked to focus on improving teaching.

While the very weakest teaching has been tackled robustly there is still too much inconsistency. You know that you need to redouble your actions to improve teaching by ensuring that all staff have high expectations, use time wisely and provide pupils with suitably challenging work. When we visited classrooms there were occasions when pupils were not being challenged. I spoke to some of the most able pupils, who explained that their work was often too easy, especially in mathematics.

You also recognise that assessment information needs to be accurate to really help focus teachers on what pupils need to learn next. We agreed that more work is needed to identify the precise knowledge, understanding and skills pupils need to be taught to progress quickly. This will also help identify gaps in learning that exist as a result of previous weaker teaching.

The new leader responsible for disadvantaged pupils and those pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities has already begun to improve the provision for these pupils. It is too early to see the impact of these improvements. However, early feedback from pupils and parents is positive.

The interim head of school closely tracks how well different groups of pupils are progressing. For example, she is looking carefully to see if boys are starting to close the gap in attainment with girls. We agreed that more work could be done using the existing information to check how quickly pupils who have fallen behind in their learning are catching up and to what extent the most able are being stretched and challenged.

Your detailed improvement plan accurately recognises the school's current strengths and weaknesses. The plan includes clear targets, has agreed milestones, and has real clarity about how the impact of actions will be monitored by leaders and evaluated by the IEB.

The school is currently making positive progress towards becoming at least good at its next section 5 inspection. However, the IEB, local authority and diocese all recognise the importance of finding strong substantive leadership from September 2018 to maintain the momentum and continue the improvements already made.

External support

The local authority took decisive action in consultation with the diocese to challenge previous school leaders and governors. The local authority has been instrumental in putting in place an extremely effective IEB, including foundation members chosen well by the diocese. The local authority has provided the current interim leadership

and continues to monitor the progress of the school carefully, providing additional specialist support as needed.

The diocese has provided additional support to further develop the religious character of the school and ensure that the Catholic ethos is maintained.

Leaders and the IEB work well with other local schools to help improve the expertise of staff and the outcomes for pupils.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the IEB, the director of education for the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for East Sussex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Lee Selby
Her Majesty's Inspector