

5 March 2018

Mrs Mary Nicholls
Headteacher
Steeple Bumpstead Primary School
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Dear Mrs Nicholls

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Steeple Bumpstead Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 21 February 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 governors 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 ensure that:

- pupils, especially the most able, are encouraged to challenge themselves and take more responsibility for their learning
- all teachers consistently provide pupils with opportunities to write at length in geography, history and science.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, your deputy headteacher and subject leader for English, the chair of the governing body and two other governors, and a group of pupils. I also had a telephone conversation with a representative

from the local authority. The school development plan and school's self-evaluation were scrutinised. You and I observed learning throughout the school, spoke to pupils during their lessons and looked at the work in their books. Your deputy headteacher, you and I evaluated the work in books of some most-able pupils. I scrutinised records of monitoring of teaching and learning, assessment information and information about the performance management of staff. The governor responsible for safeguarding, the finance manager and I scrutinised the checks the school makes on the suitability of adults to work with children and also the school's safeguarding arrangements.

Context

Although there have been some changes since the previous inspection, it is to your credit that the majority of the staff who were present at that time are still working at Steeple Bumpstead. Three teachers have left and a fourth has been on maternity leave. The governing body has had a considerable change in its membership. Both the chair and vice-chair of the governing body are relatively new to their roles. The impact of the governing body's work since the previous inspection is clearly evident. For example, through a concerted public relations exercise, the school is now oversubscribed for the first time in some years.

Main findings

Leaders' plans and actions in response to the section 5 inspection have been very thorough, well planned and focused. Consequently, improvement is evident in all areas identified as needing attention in the previous inspection report. School leaders and governors know the school and its surrounding community exceptionally well. Pupils say that they love their 'friendly, fun' school. You and your committed team have identified the school's strengths and areas for future development. Your and your senior leaders' drive and determination to constantly improve the school, to reflect on what you have done and to seek solutions, often using research, are commendable.

Governance has been strengthened considerably since the previous inspection. The local authority supported the school by putting in place an improvement board immediately following the section 5 inspection. Alongside the local authority, the governors have worked tirelessly to ensure that they get 'under the skin' of the school and that safeguarding is effective. Individual governors bring an array of skills to the governing body and utilise them well. For example, along with you, they forensically analyse all pupils' progress and attainment so that they have a very clear picture of the school's performance at any given time. As a result, they very ably and rigorously hold leaders to account for pupils' achievement. You appreciate the challenge and the support that governors offer the school. They are very visible and visit the school regularly, undertaking monitoring, and evaluating leaders' records of learning, and pupils' and parents' views. Because of the effectiveness of the governing body, the local authority removed the improvement board at the end of

the summer term 2017. However, governors have continued with the school improvement group, which regularly checks on progress of the school development plan. You and your governors say that this group provides an effective process and helps to inform future planning. During this process, if anything is spotted that is not working, you are all committed to dealing with it quickly, putting in place an appropriate solution and checking on its impact.

You and your leaders have done much to improve teaching, learning and assessment. Your monitoring of teaching is thorough and provides staff with helpful feedback to move their practice forward. As a result, pupils throughout the school, including those who have special educational needs (SEN) and/or disabilities, those who are disadvantaged and those who are most able, are largely making good progress in reading, writing and mathematics. You have ensured that teachers are confident in assessing pupils' progress. The rigorous process you have established since the previous inspection ensures that gaps in pupils' learning are identified, appropriate support or training is quickly put in place and regular checks are made to monitor impact. This has ensured that any weaker teaching is addressed and teachers are supported. You have sensibly worked with other schools and the local authority to moderate teachers' assessments of pupils' work, and teachers embrace these opportunities to improve their practice.

Learning observed in lessons during the inspection showed that teachers have high expectations of behaviour and of what pupils can achieve. Teachers regularly check on pupils' understanding and give clear instructions about what pupils will do in their independent work, which pupils say they welcome. The work set by teachers is challenging for most pupils, with the exception of some of the most able pupils in some classes. You and your leaders for English and mathematics are well aware that this is an area that still needs improvement and you have identified it in your school development plan for this academic year. All teachers offer pupils different 'chilli challenges', which pupils like. However, some most-able pupils need more direction so that they select work that is suitably challenging. Pupils told me that they would welcome harder work. As one said, 'When I do something that is challenging, it makes me feel really good about myself when I have eventually done it.' This demonstrates that some pupils, particularly the most able, are ready to take more responsibility for their learning and for challenging themselves. There are already good examples of this in some classes where pupils actively challenge each other. For example, in one class, pupils were discussing keeping wild animals as pets during 'bug club' work. When asked by the teacher to talk with their partner about whether they think people look after wild animals well, one pupil responded, 'I don't think they do. Maybe when they're small and cute. But when they're older, they don't take as much care and the animals don't want this habitat any more.'

Pupils are well supported by adults. You and governors have put in place a rigorous process to ensure that teaching assistants, alongside teachers, are held to account for the progress of pupils within their care. This was an area identified in your

previous report and has been well addressed. Pupil progress meetings are held five times a year, at which all pupils are discussed with teachers and adults. Appropriate support is put in place and checked on regularly. Teaching assistants work well with teachers to ensure that learning is accessible to all pupils. We saw many examples during the inspection of teaching assistants clarifying and questioning pupils to check on their understanding. During a lesson on story-planning, pupils were reading each other's plans. Adults reminded pupils of their role in this exercise: 'Don't forget that if you don't understand their plan, it is your responsibility to fill in the gaps.' Some pupils benefit greatly from either individual or small-group work, where adults ensure that pupils are focused and that each pupil's learning is progressed.

You and your senior leaders have done much to raise the profile of reading in the school. Increased access to a newly stocked library area, better support for reading (including from volunteers), and the introduction of a new comprehension scheme have all led to a change in pupils' attitude to reading. As a result, pupils say that they love to read, which is a dramatic change from the last time you asked for their views. 'Reading is a good skill to learn in life as you come across it a lot,' said one pupil. Pupils say that they really enjoy the 'bug club' work that you have introduced and that we saw in practice in two lessons during the inspection. Teachers' skilled questioning and the ensuing quality of pupils' debate were impressive. Pupils' independent work was of an equally high standard. This work has undoubtedly supported the rise in pupils' attainment. This is particularly so for children who exceed expectations at the end of early years, and those pupils who achieve greater depth at the end of key stages 1 and 2. What is more, pupils are clearly using their reading experience when writing. Such examples as, 'I ripped the present open like a kitten scratching at the door,' and, 'Suddenly a barbed splinter of sapphire light illuminated a set of mutilated hands and feet,' are but two of those I saw.

Through thorough analysis of pupils' work and teachers' planning, you became aware that some subjects, such as history and science, were not enabling pupils to build effectively on their previous skills. You and your team have, therefore, completely overhauled the curriculum. Subject leaders consistently use the new system of curriculum grids that you have put in place. This not only allows leaders and governors to check on the appropriateness and coverage of subject areas, but has also led to more accurate assessment of pupils' learning against national curriculum objectives. It is clear from evidence seen during the inspection that pupils have a wide experience of subjects. Pupils say that they really enjoy art. The three-dimensional owls they completed during the inspection were very creative and showed a good range of skills. Pupils also enjoy the many trips and visitors that the school arranges to enhance their learning. Teachers encourage pupils to think hard about what they are learning and to reflect on such subjects as, for example, the Holocaust. Asked questions such as, 'What do you think the world should learn from the Holocaust?', pupils responded to the teacher with incredible insight: 'I think we should know and learn that violence only leads to mass destruction.' Despite the improvements in this area, it is clear from the scrutiny of pupils' work that we did

together, that some teachers are not planning regular opportunities for pupils to write at length in subjects such as geography, history and science.

External support

The local authority has supported the school considerably since the previous inspection. It set up and chaired an improvement board, which proved very effective in both moving the school forward and also in holding to account leaders and governors. You and your governors have been astute in looking for and requesting support where you felt it was necessary. For example, you have sought out exemplars of assessment processes through both the local authority and local schools. One such exemplar you have introduced for pupils and parents has been welcomed very much by parents. One said, 'It has helped us understand in better detail, how to support our daughter's learning.' You have also engaged support to develop moderation of teachers' assessments and pupils' work. The local authority brokered a contact with the local teaching school, which you and your leaders have visited, and brought in programmes such as, 'Getting to Good' and 'Talk Less'. The school no longer requires the same level of support and is now in a secure place to consolidate the many gains it has made and to continue to improve as it makes its planned move to the multi-academy trust in April.

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

Yours sincerely

Ruth Brock
Her Majesty's Inspector