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Ms Therese Langford
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Langford

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Joseph's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 9 March 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:

- the more able pupils are routinely challenged so that they reach the higher standards of which they are capable
- pupils learn how to apply reasoning skills in all areas of mathematics, not just to arithmetic
- pupils' writing across all curriculum subjects mirrors the improved quality of the work in their English books.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, deputy headteacher and the two co-chairs of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. A telephone conversation was held with the school's

improvement adviser from the local authority. The school improvement plan and subject action plans were evaluated. Short visits were made to classrooms to observe pupils' learning and look at the work in their books. Documents were examined, including minutes of meetings of the governing body, records of checks made on the quality of teaching and information about pupils' current progress and attainment.

Context

The deputy headteacher was in the post on a temporary basis at the time of the previous inspection. She has now been appointed to the post permanently. The high turnover of staff has continued. Most teachers are new to the school since the previous inspection. The mathematics leader is currently on maternity leave.

Main findings

The frequent turnover of staff, commented on at the previous inspection, has continued. More teachers have left the school. Through necessity, the headteacher has spent much time tackling staffing issues and ensuring that there is a stable teaching team. Nevertheless, leaders have pressed ahead with necessary changes. These are now bearing fruit. The quality of teaching is improving. Some is now strong. Remaining weaknesses are being ironed out.

A high proportion of the teaching team are relatively inexperienced. This brings both benefits and challenges. Teachers are energetic and enthusiastic. They are hungry for professional development. Some show notable potential and are blossoming into effective practitioners. However, it has taken time and effort to get the team to its current point. This held back the pace of improvement until relatively recently. Improvement is happening at a fast pace now, but got off to a slow start.

The headteacher, ably supported by her deputy, has been resolute and tenacious in her efforts to drive up standards. As senior leaders, they manage the provision of training and support well. This is done through the use of a strategic school improvement plan and shorter-term action plans for subjects. These plans record clearly what needs to happen next to keep up the rate of improvement. Each plan includes a set of measurable criteria by which leaders can assess whether their actions are making the desired difference to pupils' outcomes. Leaders use these well to judge how quickly the school is improving.

In most classes, teaching reflects the positive impact of the support that has been given. However, this is not the case everywhere. Variability in the quality of teaching remains, and this is limiting the progress some pupils make. The proportion of strong teaching is increasing, but it is still not high enough to ensure that pupils make consistently good progress in a wide range of subjects.

Teachers generally pitch activities appropriately for pupils' ages. Pupils who need extra help are better supported now. They are making faster progress as a result.

However, teachers are less skilled at challenging the most able pupils to think more deeply or reach standards beyond those that are typical for their age.

Pupils' mathematics books show that teachers now help them to apply their mathematical understanding more effectively and to think more critically. Standards in mathematics are rising as a result. However, the historical weak teaching experienced by pupils in Years 5 and 6 has left them with gaps in their understanding and insecure knowledge of basic number facts. As a result, they sometimes struggle to answer complex questions correctly because their recall of numbers lets them down. Teachers in these classes are unpicking these issues and are teaching the missing bits of knowledge. Pupils' confidence with mathematics is growing as a result.

Pupils' books show that they are learning to apply their growing number knowledge more confidently when solving number problems. This is because teachers are becoming more skilled at teaching them to reason arithmetically. However, pupils do not apply the same degree of critical thinking to all aspects of mathematics. Teachers are less skilled at teaching pupils to reason when handling data or learning about shapes.

The whole school now practises handwriting every day. Pupils learn to form letters correctly and join them neatly. For some older pupils, this is a challenge because they are trying to undo poor habits from the past. Nevertheless, pupils' books show that their handwriting is improving steadily. Presentation in some books has improved notably in a short time. However, this is not happening universally because some teachers do not insist that pupils present their work as neatly as they can.

A concerted effort to improve pupils' spelling and grammar is working. Pupils now use an appropriate range of techniques to make the writing in their English books correct and interesting to read. For example, pupils in Year 5 can explain how they use a 'relative clause' to add information to a sentence and make it more interesting to the reader.

However, the improvements in pupils' writing are not evident in all subjects. Pupils' books show that they are rarely required to write in full sentences or paragraphs in subjects such as history, geography and science. This means that pupils are not practising the skills they have learned in English lessons. Consequently, they do not write as well as they might.

Subject leaders are beginning to take responsibility for improving outcomes in their subject. Training is planned to help them identify what is working well and what needs to improve. Time has been allocated for them to do this in the future, but this development is new.

Leaders now monitor the quality of teaching much more effectively. As a result, pupils' books show greater consistency. For example, teachers now routinely follow the school's policy on how to give feedback to pupils and help them improve their

work. Senior leaders now check that the policies are actually making the intended difference to pupils' progress. They make it clear to teachers if something is not working and then check that expected improvement has been made promptly. This is why the quality of teaching is improving.

Governors are making a positive contribution to the school's improvement. They are well informed about the strengths and weaknesses in teaching. They use the wealth of data available to them to evaluate whether pupils are achieving well enough. Minutes of meetings show that governors carry out their duties efficiently and effectively. They also show that governors are knowledgeable and challenging and that they support the headteacher in her efforts to raise standards.

Nevertheless, the continued absence of staff who hold key responsibilities is placing pressure on the capacity of the headteacher and deputy headteacher to maintain this rigour. This is a risk. Leaders know they cannot afford to let the pace of improvement slip. However, the breadth of their responsibilities limits the time available to them to focus on the core actions needed to ensure that remaining weaknesses in teaching are addressed quickly.

External support

The local authority (LA) has brokered an effective package of support for the school. The headteacher is complimentary about the impact of leadership training and the effective support of the school improvement adviser. This has led to the improved quality of monitoring. Support from the two teaching schools has built teachers' confidence and skills. The regular process of LA review has helped leaders to evaluate the school's effectiveness and redirect their actions as necessary to speed up the rate of improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Sandra Hayes
Her Majesty's Inspector