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Mr Paul Brockless
Stonebow Primary School
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Dear Mr Brockless

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Stonebow Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 24 April 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 new assessment system for mathematics is embedded so that it provides an efficient way of helping teachers quickly identify remaining gaps in pupils' knowledge in this subject.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, the deputy headteacher, the subject leaders for English and mathematics and representatives of the governing body. I also held a voluntary meeting for any members of staff who wished to attend. I evaluated the leaders' improvement planning and undertook an extensive scrutiny of pupils' work. I also met with a large group of pupils and toured the school with you to see lessons taking place in different year groups. I checked that the school's records of safeguarding checks met requirements.

Context

You joined the school as headteacher from the start of the current academic year. A new leader for mathematics commenced in her role at the same time. The leader for English took up her post in January 2018.

Main findings

Upon arrival at the school, you quickly developed an effective understanding of the many strengths of Stonebow Primary School, along with those areas that needed to be attended to. While not neglecting other aspects such as reviewing procedures for pupils' management during lunchtimes, the key areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection have received the greatest attention from you and your staff. These areas form the centre of a clear and logical action plan to ensure that the school becomes good as soon as possible. You have written timetables that show exactly when, for example, you and your staff will observe pupils reading their books to find out how well reading is taught, along with what professional development you will ensure is provided to staff. This systematic approach to change means that there is no drift away to more peripheral matters and that no important actions are missed. These timetables are also helping staff across the school have a clear picture of what changes are taking place and why. You match this with a weekly briefing of information for staff, including teaching assistants. You have included in these timetables details of regular monitoring of the quality of teaching and of pupils' work so that you can be sure that the actions taking place are having the results you and the governing body intend. All meetings have a clear purpose so that no time is wasted. The school's system of managing the performance of teachers includes targets to make them accountable for the progress pupils, and particularly the lower-attaining pupils, make.

The governing body is working closely with you to ensure that changes take place briskly but not at so hurried a pace that their impact is reduced. Led by a knowledgeable and experienced chair, governors are able to speak confidently about the improvements that are taking place and why these are needed. Governors know precisely where pupils' achievement is strongest and where it is less effective. They are checking that you and your staff are putting the greatest emphasis on any year groups where fewer pupils are currently at the standards expected for their age or where pupils are not making the gains they need. They meet regularly with you and other school leaders to discuss the actions staff are taking so that this improves.

You are ensuring that teachers are both supporting and challenging the lower-attaining pupils increasingly well, including those pupils who are disadvantaged. There is a wide range of support for these pupils, including before the start of the school day. For example, pupils who attend the breakfast club have opportunities to learn their multiplication tables and spellings. Pupils whose knowledge of phonics is not yet secure are able to receive additional teaching during school time so that they learn to read and spell words more accurately. During my visit, I saw lower-attaining pupils in Year 1 keen to show me what they were reading and to demonstrate how they could read new words. Staff are organising many further support packages for

pupils who need to catch up. These include additional help for pupils of different ages in reading, writing and mathematics. Some of this support is paid for by the pupil premium so that the progress of those pupils who are disadvantaged will accelerate.

Pupils whom I met on my visit told me without exception that they find this support useful and like to attend. They told me that this is because teachers will explain things well and, if necessary, use resources and different language so that they understand more easily. I saw for myself pupils in Years 3 and 4 learning how to partition numbers. The member of staff provided cubes to those who needed them to help calculate the answer, while those who did not need them were required to reach the answer without them. A very large majority of the pupils spoken to said that work was challenging for them. They explained that teachers know what they can do and do not allow them to mark time with work that is too easy.

You have made the decision to deploy teaching assistants flexibly throughout the academic year to whichever year groups and aspects of work need the greatest support. While some teaching assistants were initially apprehensive about doing this, you explained to them the specific gaps in different pupils' learning across the school. As a result, teaching assistants understood their important role in helping different pupils catch up. You have also made sure that teaching assistants receive good advice and ongoing support from colleagues who are experienced in teaching specific year groups or aspects of work. As a result, pupils are receiving the support they need to catch up more quickly and teaching assistants now feel confident in their role.

Subject leaders are undertaking joint lesson observations with you to check that teaching is improving and, in particular, that pupils of lower ability, including those who are disadvantaged, are making better progress. School information indicates that the proportion of pupils in most year groups who are at least at the standard for their age is rising. In the small minority of year groups where this is not the case, you are fully aware of the reasons for this and are putting more energy into resolving it. You are keen for pupils' outcomes to be consistently good as quickly as possible. Exercise books from a wide sample of lower-attaining and disadvantaged pupils across the school confirm that the progress pupils overall are making is improving.

You and senior leaders are helping all teachers to use what they know about their pupils' knowledge and skills to plan the next steps in learning for them. Teachers analyse the information from the results of standardised tests that their pupils undertake at different points in the year. They then adjust their planning to take account of any gaps in pupils' understanding. For example, these tests showed that many pupils in Year 6 did not understand fractions well enough. As a result, the teachers of these pupils gave them extra teaching about fractions so that pupils' understanding improved and their confidence increased.

Upon your arrival, you noted that teachers were using a variety of different planning formats across the school. You judged that each of these formats had both

advantages and disadvantages but that overall the system for planning was not consistent. You and the subject leader for mathematics took the benefits of each system and combined these into a single system that all teachers use. This makes it easier for you to see if any teachers are not planning in the way that staff have agreed is the best for pupils.

Pupils' books that I looked at during my visit showed convincingly that teachers are increasingly noting where pupils do not understand something and are giving them subsequent pieces of work that will help them to learn. For example, some lower-attaining pupils in Year 3 did not understand how to spell the word 'because'. Teachers gave these pupils good and specific guidance. In pieces that pupils had written after this, they showed that they could spell this word correctly and independently in their writing. Likewise, some of the less able pupils in Year 1 had completed work that showed that they were unsure of how to use a number line. The teacher gave them simpler examples so that they understood how to add 11 and five to make 16. Where pupils have gained a secure understanding, teachers move them on to other work. However, pupils' books show that teachers continue to check periodically that pupils have not forgotten what they have already learned. Where this happens, teachers remind them again how to do it.

Staff have received training so that they can use the school's new system for tracking pupils' performance well. Although you have assessment systems for reading and writing that are effective, you and senior leaders have judged that the system for checking pupils' achievement in mathematics does not meet your needs. This is because it takes an undue amount of time for staff to complete and does not always provide them with the information they need to plan the next steps in pupils' learning. However, you have not yet embedded across the school a replacement system that enables teachers to do this efficiently.

Teachers are increasingly helping pupils to understand and use a wider range of vocabulary and grammatical structures in their work. Teachers' planning now includes new words that teachers judge that their pupils need to know and apply to their speech and writing. Pupils I met during my visit were keen to tell me about the 'working walls' in each classroom and how these displayed examples of ambitious words and phrases that pupils could use when they described something aloud or in writing. Pupils were keen to tell me how they used words such as 'marinated' and 'despite' when they wrote, and how their teachers 'help us to use synonyms for 'said''. Pupils in Year 5 could explain to me how they were using phrases such as 'pillage and plunder' in their topic on pirates. They also told me how staff model in class how to express yourself well both verbally and in writing and give certificates in assembly for using good vocabulary. Pupils also spoke enthusiastically of opportunities that teachers give them to identify deliberate mistakes of grammar or spelling in a piece of writing. Pupils explained how this makes them alert to errors made in their own work.

You are ensuring that the good teaching and leadership practice in the school is being shared among staff. For example, teachers work together in small groups to observe each other's teaching and to give each other advice. Teachers I met told me

that this is proving to be a good way of providing mutual support throughout the school. Staff also told me that they work together well and that there is no sense of a 'them and us' division between teachers and teaching assistants. Everyone is keen to use ideas from their colleagues, regardless of their role. The assistant headteacher is supporting the new subject leader for English so that she is clear on her role and can prioritise the most important tasks to move the school on. Senior leaders are also giving effective support to those teachers who have aspects of their teaching that you judge to be less strong, such as the pace of lessons, so that they can teach more effectively.

External support

The school is part of the Loughborough Primary Academy Partnership. For example, the new subject leader for English is being mentored by an experienced senior leader from another school within the partnership. The governing body has also accessed training from the partnership to help it understand, for example, the teaching of fundamental British values in schools, as well as how it can monitor pupils' outcomes effectively. In addition, governors have also used a national leader of governance to review the effectiveness of their structure. The local authority has provided training to the governing body on areas such as the safeguarding of pupils, as well as support for governors who are new to their role, in order that they can quickly play an effective part in helping the school to improve. The local authority's specialist teaching service has taught staff, including teaching assistants, about dyslexia. This has enabled staff to find out a range of strategies that they can use to support pupils who have this condition to learn, as well as recognise the signs that can help to identify more quickly other pupils who may be dyslexic.

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

Yours sincerely

Roary Pownall
Her Majesty's Inspector