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Louisa Aldridge
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Dear Mrs Aldridge

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Astmoor Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 12 July 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:

- clarify how planned action for school improvement is linked to pupils' outcomes
- identify checkpoints in the school improvement plan so that all involved can celebrate success or take swift action if there is any slippage
- double its efforts to find out and respond to the views of pupils, parents and carers and staff.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, six governors, six subject leaders and a representative of the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the previous

inspection. I spoke with a group of six Year 5 and Year 6 pupils to gain their views of the school. You accompanied me on a tour of the classrooms to observe pupils at work. We looked at a few pupils' workbooks and the display of writing around the school. I spoke to several younger pupils during their mathematics lesson. I checked the school's evaluation and improvement plans, records relating to pupils' achievement and your checks on the quality of teaching. I also scrutinised the minutes of governing-body meetings.

Context

There have been no changes in the school since the section 5 inspection, which judged the school to require improvement. There is a vacancy on the governing body and recruitment to this role is under way.

Main findings

Everyone associated with the school community was disappointed with the outcome of the previous inspection. Morale plummeted. However, you have an uncompromising commitment to care for and educate all pupils at Astmoor Primary School. So you, governors and staff picked yourselves up and renewed your efforts to improve the effectiveness of the school. You are moving in the right direction to accomplish this vision.

Your enthusiasm and energy have spurred the whole school community on. You are conscious that the school has been deemed to require improvement for some time. So now you are taking a more strategic approach to tackling the weaknesses. With support from the local authority, you and the governors wrote an action plan to guide the school's work in its efforts to be judged good. In this way you are establishing a firm foundation upon which the school can improve. Your senior leadership team supports your vision and leads on key areas of school improvement very effectively.

At the previous inspection, inspectors highlighted a need to reduce the unevenness in the quality of teaching to enable pupils to make gains in their learning and reach higher standards, particularly in writing. You placed improving the quality of teaching at the forefront of your efforts. You decided to 'go back to basics' to improve the practice of all staff. You led frank and honest professional discussions to reach an agreed picture of what strong practice would look like at Astmoor. You raised expectations of staff and set a high bar for classroom practice. You and your deputy headteacher modelled good practice in the classroom by teaching mathematics in Year 5. In this way you shared strategies with staff for moving pupils on quickly in their learning.

Detailed guidelines set out exactly what action staff need to take to make sure that teaching is even across the school. This means that they should plan work at the right level for pupils and that pupils should know what is expected of them. Opportunities to

share experience within and beyond the school have developed the confidence and skills of teachers. This has also increased their subject knowledge. You have moved teachers to new classes to capitalise on their strengths.

You have not shied away from tackling weaker practice. Based on strong professional relationships, you have held difficult conversations with several teachers. Bespoke activities, ranging from support plans to individualised training, have led to more effective teaching. This has been successful. Leaders' checks on the quality of teaching and learning show that teaching is more even across the school.

A particular success since the previous inspection is the development of subject leaders.

Subject leaders lead with enthusiasm, confidence and competence. Investment in enhancing their subject knowledge and leadership skills has resulted in strong leaders ready to contribute significantly to the success of the school. Reviewing responsibilities has led to leaders who relish researching their subjects and sharing this knowledge with colleagues. Strong accountability measures are in place. To illustrate this, subject leaders talked about making sure they are the best they can be as their work will be checked by their colleagues. They do not want to let each other or the pupils down. Each leader has reviewed the curriculum content individually and together so that it meets the needs of the pupils. This includes opportunities for pupils to learn French.

Coaching by the deputy headteacher has enabled subject leaders to create and implement an assessment strategy which captures the progress that pupils are making in each subject. They have analysed mid-point achievement and taken action to tweak curriculum content so that it is just right. Through book scrutinies, checking of teachers' plans and talking to pupils, subject leaders have an in-depth view of the progress that pupils make in each subject across the school. All have reported their findings to governors so that the latter have a clear view of the achievements of pupils. Subject leaders look forward to the end-of-year collation of pupils' progress information to establish a baseline to plan improvements. As self-reflective professionals they know what action needs to be taken next, for example developing greater depth in knowledge in some subjects and working on the links between early years and Year 1.

Your leadership of the improvements is paying dividends. More children are reaching a good level of development in early years and so are ready for Year 1. Pupils in Year 1 have reached just over the 2017 national average in the phonics screening check, which reflects your investment in getting younger pupils to read more quickly. As a result, younger pupils I spoke with could easily read the instructions in their mathematics workbooks.

Provisional results for Year 2 and Year 6 show an increase in the proportions of pupils reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics compared with 2017. Early results for Year 6 also show a significant increase in the number of pupils

reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics, which reflects stronger teaching across this phase. More pupils have reached greater depth, which pays testament to the work you and your staff have done to challenge these pupils. Your information on pupils' progress across the school shows that most-able pupils are doing much better this year. You and governors check closely on how extra funds help disadvantaged pupils to achieve. This is illustrated in the higher attainment and better progress for this group of pupils compared to 2017. These results are very encouraging.

Leaders and governors have made the least progress in establishing systems for finding out and responding to the views of pupils, parents and staff on the quality of education provided by the school. Leaders and governors have taken steps to plan activities which enable them to ask parents and pupils about certain aspects of the school. Pupils I spoke with feel that they are listened to and leaders respond to their views. However, the small group of parents who spoke with me felt that leaders and governors still have some way to go to ensure that communication is effective and regular.

Governors know the school and the community. They know the strengths of the school and the aspects which need to improve. Information about pupils' progress in all subjects is shared with governors at regular meetings. Minutes of these meetings show that governors increasingly challenge leaders about decisions, based on the effect on pupils' outcomes. Members of the governing body have a range of skills which contribute to holding leaders to account for the effectiveness of planned action.

Pupils I spoke with told me that they feel safe and well cared for because of the strong, positive relationships with staff. I observed pupils working hard and enjoying their work. A variety of displayed writing shows that pupils practise their writing skills across other curriculum areas.

Your evaluation of the school provides a clear picture of improvements made to date. Your development plan identifies clear priorities for improvement which relate to the recommendations made in the previous inspection report. You identify specific and appropriate actions to be taken, you stipulate who will carry out each action and include a review of the work implemented and the result.

However, the weakness of the development plan is that it is unclear as to how the planned action for improvement is directly linked to pupils' outcomes. It also lacks key checkpoints so that all involved can celebrate success or take swift action if there is any slippage.

External support

The local authority has organised a link with another school to support training in phonics, mathematics and moderation techniques. Your local authority adviser has

provided bespoke training for English and mathematics leaders to strengthen their leadership skills successfully.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body and the director of children's services for Halton local authority. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Eileen Mulgrew

Senior Her Majesty's Inspector