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Mrs Bernadette Cleland
Helmingham Community Primary School
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Dear Mrs Cleland

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Helmingham Community Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 4 December 2018, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken since the school's most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in November 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, I held meetings with you, the leader for mathematics, members of staff and three members of the governing body including the chair of governors. I also met a representative from the local authority and a leader from the consortium multi-academy trust.

Together, we visited every class to observe pupils' learning and spoke with them about their learning. We evaluated work in a sample of pupils' books to determine the progress pupils are making over time. I also spoke with parents and carers at the end of the day.

A wide range of documentation was scrutinised, including the school's record for the suitable employment of staff. The statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

Since the full inspection, carried out in November 2017, there have been no significant changes to the school staff. There has been a change in the leadership of mathematics that took place this term. Two new governors have joined the governing body. You have overseen a programme of building works as part of the improvements to the school building.

There are plans for the school to join the Consortium Multi-Academy Trust (CMAT) in February 2019. Further due diligence checks are being carried out before the final date is confirmed. However, additional support is being provided by the leaders of CMAT to improve the capacity of leadership in the school.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Together with the leaders from the trust, you have provided a clear focus for the school's improvement. There is a greater clarity regarding the order in which priorities are tackled. Training is targeted well to support the development of teachers and achieve the actions identified in your school improvement plan. Staff spoken with value the support they are receiving by working alongside teachers in other schools. Consequently, the quality of teaching is improving over time.

Parents I spoke with were positive about the school's provision. They told me that staff dealt with concerns effectively and that Helmingham is a safe and happy school. Parents appreciate the inclusive and nurturing environment to ensure that pupils' needs are met well.

Supported well by the local authority, you have a systematic approach to checking the quality of teaching and learning. You have an accurate understanding of where the strengths and weaknesses lie. The school's improvement plan reflects the priorities identified by the local authority. However, your plan would benefit from specific and timely interim targets, so you and your governors can measure the impact of your work precisely over time.

Leaders have introduced a consistent approach to tracking pupils' progress across the school. Teachers have a better understanding of pupils' skills and understanding as they enter each class. The trust provides regular opportunities for teachers to meet with other colleagues and check the accuracy of their assessments. The information is used well to identify any pupils who are falling behind. Additional teaching is helping to improve pupils' progress from their individual starting points.

You rightly acknowledge that aspects of your work have yet to fully impact on teachers' practice and pupils' achievements. Your chosen approach to delivering the curriculum is helping teachers to understand what pupils need to achieve. Teachers plan activities that capture pupils' interests. Pupils study a broad range of subjects

developing their creative, technical and scientific skills. However, opportunities to deepen pupils' knowledge are variable across the school. Teachers ask questions to check pupils' understanding but do not make effective use of their responses to challenge pupils further in their thinking. Consequently, while there have been improvements in pupils' achievement, these are not as strong as they need to be.

Teachers are making more effective use of strategies to develop pupils' mathematical reasoning skills. Specific activities are planned to help pupils develop a secure understanding of key concepts. For example, in a key stage 1 class, pupils developed their calculation skills by using different strategies to understand patterns in number bonds. Pupils' workbooks show an increasing use of practical problems to support their progress by applying their key skills. However, teachers do not have a consistent understanding of when to use these strategies to consolidate pupils' mathematical understanding. In some classes, pupils spend too much time solving similar calculations, so limiting the progress they make.

Pupils write frequently and across different subjects. Where the work is produced in writing books, pupils are using their writing skills well and making good progress. In topic work, the quality of writing does not match that seen in their English books. There are too many examples of pupils' key writing skills not being secured and similar errors are not being addressed. Teachers' expectations of pupils' presentation have begun to drop after an initial impact at the start of the school year.

Middle leaders receive good support from the trust. The support is used well to develop their subject expertise and leadership skills. Some leaders are new to their role but have made a good start in identifying key actions to support improvement in their areas of responsibility.

The governing body is committed to improving its challenge of school leaders. Governors' visits to the school are closely linked to the school's identified priorities. They use their skills and knowledge to question leaders about the impact of the actions they have taken. Through their meetings, next steps are identified and recorded in their minutes. However, governors are not clear about how quickly they can identify that actions have been successful. This is because the school's action plan does not include these measures. This means the challenge governors provide is not as sharp as it could be.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective action towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

- Improve leadership and management further by:
 - ensuring that improvement plans include specific interim targets, so leaders can measure the impact of their actions on raising pupils' achievement over time.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Mellors
Her Majesty's Inspector