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Mrs Angela Hill
Palfrey Junior School
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Dear Mrs Hill

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Palfrey Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 7 March 2019, 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 recent section 5 inspection in order for the school to become good.

The school should take further action to ensure that:

- leaders' plans identify more precise targets for improvement and contain milestones and measurable success criteria against which progress can be measured
- teachers make effective use of ongoing assessment to plan work that matches the needs of the most able pupils and disadvantaged pupils more closely.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the executive headteacher, the two heads of school, the inclusion leader and the subject leaders for English and mathematics. I spoke with the chair of governors, two members of the governing body and the chief operating officer of the Cadmus Federation. Telephone

conversations were held with a representative of the local authority and a school improvement consultant who has recently undertaken a review of the school's leadership. Discussions focused on the actions taken by leaders since the last inspection and their impact on pupils' achievement. I evaluated the school's action plans and a range of other documents, including the school's self-evaluation, records of checks made on the quality of teaching, and the single central record. Together with the executive headteacher, I made short visits to lessons in all year groups. I scrutinised and evaluated work in pupils' books and heard a group of pupils read. I spoke to a small number of parents at the start of the school day.

Context

Since the previous inspection in December 2017, three teachers have left the school and two teachers have joined. Three new governors have been appointed.

Main findings

Leaders and governors are united in their commitment to improve the school. They have an accurate understanding of what is needed to bring about improvements. Governors have high expectations and provide robust support and challenge for leaders. Together, leaders and governors are ensuring that pupils are making better progress than in the past.

The executive headteacher and heads of school have worked successfully to develop middle leadership within the school. The leaders for English and mathematics bring secure subject knowledge and enthusiasm to their roles. They know the strengths and weaknesses in their subject areas because they make regular checks on the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. These leaders are working alongside senior leaders in the school, and other middle leaders across the federation, to develop their leadership skills so that they can fully support teachers in improving pupils' outcomes. They are developing the skills to hold teachers to account.

The school's assessment systems have been refined and provide detailed information about pupils' progress in reading and mathematics across the year. Leaders are focused on ensuring that pupils meet the national age-related expectations, as well as challenging pupils to reach higher standards. They make thorough checks on pupils' progress each term using standardised tests. Leaders meet with teachers to review assessment information and to identify pupils who are not making the progress they should. Teachers and teaching assistants provide additional support to these pupils.

A clear system is now in place to monitor the additional support that pupils receive and the difference this is making to their learning. Teaching assistants are benefiting from training and feedback to develop their skills. They liaise closely with

teachers to ensure that pupils receive the right support. Consequently, lower- and middle-attaining pupils are making better progress. Work in books shows that interventions are increasingly effective in addressing gaps in pupils' learning and helping them to catch up, particularly in mathematics. However, disadvantaged pupils' outcomes at the end of key stage 2 are not improving as strongly as those of other pupils.

Although leaders' use of termly assessment information to identify trends in pupils' achievement is improving, teachers' use of ongoing assessment is less effective. As a result, in some classes, work does not match pupils' needs closely enough, particularly the most able pupils. Too often, these pupils spend time completing work they can already do before moving on to more challenging tasks. This means that too many of these pupils are still not making the progress of which they are capable.

The quality of teaching is improving, although leaders rightly identify that some inconsistencies remain. Leaders model effective practice and work alongside individual teachers to plan learning. They have introduced a 'teaching triad' system to enable teachers to observe and learn from each other's practice. Leaders are using this approach to develop teachers' skills in specific areas, such as guided reading, and reasoning and problem solving in mathematics. This complements the training that staff receive, and teachers say that it is helpful in developing their skills.

Leaders have provided training to improve teachers' questioning skills. As a result, teachers use questioning increasingly well to check pupils' understanding. Some teachers ask questions that deepen and extend pupils' thinking. Teachers encourage pupils to work in pairs to talk about their learning and rehearse their answers before sharing them with the class. This is helping to build pupils' confidence and improve their speaking skills. The school's 'three before me' strategy is successfully developing pupils' independence. In lessons, pupils are no longer reliant on adults for help. Instead, they use resources and ask their peers before turning to a teacher for support.

Work to improve standards in reading is starting to bear fruit. Leaders have introduced a dedicated unit of work to promote the teaching of inference and deduction skills and this is built upon throughout the year. Well-organised guided reading sessions take place across the school and work in pupils' books shows that their comprehension skills are improving. School leaders have coached staff in how to teach guided reading more effectively. All staff have benefited from training to improve their subject knowledge. Pupils enjoy reading and read fluently and accurately. They read books that match their abilities and older pupils demonstrate increasingly sound inference skills. In 2018, pupils' attainment in reading at the end of key stage 2 rose to be in line with national averages at both the expected standard and greater depth.

Teachers are becoming more proficient at teaching the skills pupils need to be able to reason mathematically. Pupils are encouraged to talk about their learning and this is helping them to explain their thinking more clearly. Work in books shows that teachers are providing more regular opportunities for pupils to reason and solve problems. As a result, pupils in all year groups are making stronger progress. In 2018, the proportion of pupils attaining the expected standard rose to be in line with the national average. More pupils were working at greater depth by the end of Year 6 than in previous years.

Leaders make effective use of the information they collect from checks on teaching and pupils' progress to inform improvement priorities. However, improvement plans do not fully reflect leaders' understanding of the specific aspects of teaching and pupils' outcomes that need to improve. They do not contain milestones and measurable success criteria to enable leaders and governors to evaluate whether actions are having sufficient impact.

External support

The Cadmus Federation provides the majority of external support to the school. The chief operating officer makes termly visits to meet with senior leaders and to check the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. Leaders welcome the challenge and support these visits bring. The federation has also provided effective support to develop the quality of teaching through staff training, moderation and the opportunity for leaders to learn from the best practice in other schools. The partnership with the federation has made a valuable contribution to securing school improvement.

The local authority has very recently commissioned a review of leadership and management. This review has been helpful in identifying strengths and next steps for the school. A system is now in place for the local authority to make termly checks on the school's progress towards becoming a good school.

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

Yours sincerely

Claire Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector