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Mrs Sarah Callanan
St Stephen's CofE First School
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Dear Mrs Callanan

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of St Stephen's CofE First School

Following my visit to your school on 6 June 2019, 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 October 2017. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Evidence

During this inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, subject leaders for English, mathematics and early years, and members of the governing body, including the chair of the governing body via internet link. A telephone conversation was held with a representative of the local authority. The headteacher and deputy headteacher accompanied the inspector on visits to classrooms and looked at pupils' workbooks. The local authority's statement of action and the school's improvement plan were evaluated.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the nursery teacher has returned to work, following her maternity leave. There have been no other changes to staffing. This has maintained the stability of the school and demonstrates the strong dedication of staff and support for school leaders. The school has a provisional date of 1 July to

become a sponsored academy.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Leaders and governors have ensured that the school has enhanced its provision in almost all aspects identified as areas for improvement in the previous inspection. Actions taken are appropriate and leading to improvement. As a result, the school is moving firmly in the right direction. The headteacher, ably supported by the deputy headteacher, has established an ambitious vision that is increasingly shared by all staff. Together they have created a nurturing and inclusive ethos in which pupils feel safe. Leaders have a clear, strategic, long-term vision for the school. With the support of the local authority, they have set out clear priorities in the school action plan, which identifies precise and measurable actions. They are establishing secure foundations for sustained and continued improvement.

Governors provide good levels of challenge and support. Their wide range of experience and expertise is used effectively to hold leaders to account. They have a close working relationship with staff and a strong awareness of the improvements being made. This is because they visit school regularly and are provided with clear and comprehensive information from school leaders. They understand how well different groups of pupils are achieving and ensure that external support is used efficiently to accelerate the improvements that are taking place. Governors are astute and well-informed.

All staff have benefited from the vast amount of internal and external training provided. Most training has been focused on whole-school needs, such as improving writing and mathematics, but training has also been carefully matched to individual staff needs, following monitoring activities. For example, the early years leader has visited other schools to observe good practice, attended training for middle leaders and attended an early years conference. This has helped strengthen leadership in this key stage. However, further improvement is needed, especially in relation to assessment. Limited and inconsistent evidence was available during the inspection in children's learning journals to validate the progress children are making and substantiate leaders' judgements about how well children are achieving in the early years.

The development of middle-leadership roles has continued to improve. Leaders for English and mathematics have good subject knowledge. They have introduced new initiatives and implemented schemes of work to strengthen teaching and raise outcomes across the school. They work collaboratively with all staff and provide good levels of support for their colleagues. They have a good understanding of assessment in key stages 1 and 2 and monitor pupils' progress carefully. The inspector saw good evidence of their influence on teaching and other staff's work in developing pupils' writing and mathematical skills.

Senior and middle leaders carry out robust and regular checks on the quality of teaching. This is now a strength of the school. An annual calendar ensures that

checks on teaching are systematic and varied. Leaders accurately identify what is working well and where further developments are needed. Areas for improvement are carefully linked to adults' performance management targets. Leaders have also implemented detailed action plans to ensure that practice, particularly that in the early years, is more consistent. These plans are reviewed regularly and staff performance monitored closely.

Leaders regularly assess pupils' progress and attainment through tests, teacher assessments and pupil progress meetings with class teachers. However, the school's current commercial assessment system is not reliable or fit for purpose as it does not align with teachers' own assessments and national assessment tests. Leaders are aware of this. Plans are in place to replace the current assessment system to improve accuracy and reliability. Nevertheless, leaders collect and analyse data thoroughly. Detailed tracking exists for each cohort and different pupil groups. For example, leaders have detected that boys, especially those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and who are disadvantaged, do not achieve as well as girls. A gender gap therefore exists in most year groups. While teachers in Years 1 to 4 ensure that activities planned stimulate and engage boys, less attention is paid to this aspect in the early years. Almost all activities observed in the early years during the inspection showed, on the whole, boys and girls learning separately.

The coordinator for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND has ensured that the school's approaches for identifying pupils' needs, and putting into place appropriate support, is effective. Interventions are often tailored to pupils' individual needs. Portfolios of evidence gathered by the leader show that pupils with SEND are making good progress from their starting points. Leaders work in close collaboration with external agencies to provide specialist support. Attainment for disadvantaged pupils is also rising as a result of improved teaching. Differences between these pupils and others nationally are diminishing. The numbers of pupils working at greater depth is rising slowly in mathematics at the end of key stage 1. This is due to the increased level of challenge presented for the most able pupils. However, overall, the proportion of pupils reaching greater depth remains below national average in reading, writing and mathematics.

Leaders have reviewed curriculum provision. 'Evidence books' and curriculum 'non-negotiables' have been introduced to ensure breadth and balance in the curriculum. Pupils' workbooks capture photographic evidence and examples of pupils' work in the foundation subjects, such as music, art and design technology. A good range of evidence was seen in relation to science teaching, with pupils' scientific investigation being taught well. However, pupils' skills in history and geography are underdeveloped. Progression in these subjects is limited. Activities are knowledge-based and too little time is given to developing pupils' enquiry skills or deepening their understanding. Extra-curricular opportunities add to pupils enjoyment of school. Curriculum enrichment grids portray the wide range of activities, trips and clubs offered for each year group. Whole-school events, such as an Eid party and 'spectacular sports day' reinforce pupils' cultural and physical development well.

Attendance is in line with the national average for all groups of pupils. Leaders work hard to ensure that pupils attend regularly. They track the attendance of pupils who are persistently absent meticulously. Robust follow-up, through telephone calls, letters and home visits, has led to a decrease in the numbers of pupils whose attendance is a concern. Parents are asked to provide evidence of appointments in school time and leaders only authorise one day's absence for religious celebrations such as Eid, thus reinforcing the key message about regular attendance. This area is successfully led and managed.

Provision in the early years has been a key focus since the previous inspection. Leaders have invested heavily in resources and equipment in the outdoor area. The outdoor learning environment is a strength and used extremely well to develop different areas of the early years curriculum. Since the previous inspection, leaders have monitored provision, and, in collaboration with the local authority, have scrutinised practice and children's work closely. A detailed plan together with regular reviews and monitoring have been used to strengthen teaching and outcomes.

Senior leaders have taken significant action to improve the early years. However, provision is not yet consistently good and many children are not yet well enough prepared for some elements of the curriculum in Year 1. For example, too many children are unable to use finger spaces consistently in their writing and some continue to reverse their numbers. This is partly because additional adults are not utilised effectively to maximise learning at the start of lessons and only very small numbers of children benefit from teacher-led activities, such as guided writing.

Teaching and support staff have received training on the use of effective questioning skills. As a result, adults in the early years use probing questions to develop children's communication skills and check their understanding. Adults are also now more adept at encouraging children to use their own ideas. Children chose, for example, what colour powder paints they wanted to mix together for their pictures and made different ice-cream flavours in the mud kitchen with a variety of toppings. This adds to their creative development. Adults supervise children carefully and intervene at appropriate stages to extend children's thinking or move an activity on. However, on occasion, lone and quiet children are left too long without adult engagement and checking. This restricts their communication and language skills and hinders the development of their confidence and social skills. Leaders' self-evaluation is accurate and they are continuing to make the right decisions to ensure that early years provision is strong.

Teaching and support staff form a united team. They have worked hard to improve their practice and are committed and show a steely determination to improving outcomes for pupils. Training, and support from external and internal sources, together with improved schemes of work, are leading to higher expectations being set. The recently introduced writing scheme is, for example, contributing to neater handwriting and presentation in pupils' books. Greater levels of challenge are

provided for all pupils, especially the most able, and their needs are carefully considered. For example, the most able readers are provided with a selection of fiction and non-fiction books to take home. They also join phonic lessons with pupils in older classes to extend their reading skills.

Pupils' use of problem-solving and reasoning in mathematics is improving. Pupils use resources well to aid their visualisation skills. They have a good understanding of place value as a result. However, pupils in Years 3 and 4 are less adept than Year 1 and 2 pupils at applying the skills taught in the commercial scheme to their independent work. Older pupils still struggle in articulating and explaining how they reach their answers. Nevertheless, work in pupils' books shows an increasing range of problem-solving and reasoning activities, so these skills are developing well.

Pupils' writing is improving. The leader of English has ensured that pupils are given more time to write in order to develop their stamina and write at length. The writing process is clearly planned with pupils drafting, editing and publishing their work. Teachers focus on the skills needed and then provide pupils with up to an hour to present a detailed piece of quality writing. A cross-curricular approach has increased pupils' ability to transfer the skills taught in other subject areas. However, pupils' grammar, punctuation and spelling skills remain weak. This impacts on the quality and accuracy of pupils' writing. Occasionally, some teachers insert the correct spellings, punctuation or vocabulary on pupils' behalf. This limits pupils' ability to identify and correct errors for themselves.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

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

The school's action plan is fit for purpose.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Heather Simpson
Her Majesty's Inspector