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Mrs Wendy Nelson  
Thorntree Primary School  
The Greenway  
Thorntree  
Middlesbrough  
TS3 9NH

Dear Mrs Nelson

**Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thorntree Primary School.**

Following my visit to your school on 30 April 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 three successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

Senior leaders and governors are not 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:

- focus sharply on addressing the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection, improving pupils' outcomes in reading, writing and mathematics as a matter of urgency
- ensure that governors challenge leaders more rigorously to evaluate the impact of improvement actions.

**Evidence**

During the inspection, I held meetings with you, other senior and middle leaders, the chair of the governing body and the senior adviser for Middleborough local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The school's improvement plan was evaluated along with minutes of meetings of the governing body. The most recent external audit of the school's use of additional funding for disadvantaged

pupils was evaluated along with other records of external monitoring, challenge and support. We visited lessons together and observed teaching in classes from Nursery to Year 6. I spoke to pupils about their learning and looked through their books during lesson observations. I heard several pupils read and talked to them about their learning. I worked alongside subject leaders, who shared examples of pupils' work with me.

## **Context**

The current headteacher and the chair of the governing body led the school through the previous two inspections that resulted in requiring improvement judgements. There have been some changes to subject leadership responsibilities since the last inspection.

## **Main findings**

Leaders and governors have been slow to address the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Despite the support provided by the local authority and other external partners, not enough progress has been made in improving pupils' outcomes. Leaders and governors have an overly optimistic view of the school's performance and the pace at which improvements are being made.

For the last three years, pupils' standards of attainment by the end of Year 6 have remained much lower than average. At the end of Year 6 in 2018, only 41% of pupils reached the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics combined. Achievement in reading was particularly weak, with pupils' rate of progress through key stage 2 ranked in the lowest 10% of schools nationally. Progress was also below average in mathematics. Although pupils did better in writing, pupils' rate of progress in this subject declined from that seen in 2017 and was not good. Outcomes in other key stages are also not improving. In 2018, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development by the end of the Reception Year fell, and was below average. Standards by the end of Year 2 in reading, writing and mathematics also declined to below average. Governors reported that, since the previous inspection, the school has focused on improving the wider curriculum; however, outcomes in core subjects still require urgent improvement. Too many pupils are leaving school without the necessary reading, writing and mathematical skills for successful learning in secondary school.

The quality of teaching is not improving quickly enough. Leaders have made changes to the staff with responsibility for subject leadership, including mathematics and science; this has contributed to the slow pace of improvement in these areas. Current leaders in these core subjects have, however, benefited from very recent leadership training and are now taking steps to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in their subjects. In contrast, support for the English subject leader has been inconsistent.

The teaching of reading across the school is not good enough. Some key stage 1 teachers give pupils books to read that are not well matched to their phonic knowledge. This knocks pupils' confidence and slows their progress. Some pupils in key stage 2, including some who passed the phonics screening check in Year 1, are now making such slow progress in their reading that they have fallen below the standard expected for their age.

In English lessons, lower-ability pupils are taken out of class to be taught in separate groups. As a result, they are missing out on the new things their peers are learning. Leaders and governors do not check carefully enough whether this approach is making a positive difference to pupils' progress. The gap is widening for key stage 2 pupils who are already struggling to learn to read. The English subject leader is addressing pupils' lack of enjoyment in reading by introducing a mobile library and making sure that teachers in all year groups read a story to pupils every day. It is too early to evaluate the impact of these recent initiatives.

Mathematics and science subject leaders acknowledge that a legacy of weak teaching in these subjects means that many pupils now have large gaps in their knowledge and skills. Teachers have to backtrack to help pupils catch up. While there are early signs that pupils are starting to make better progress in these subjects, further work is needed to ensure that the quality of teaching in mathematics and science is consistently good. Furthermore, the variation in the quality of teaching in English and mathematics, between different classes and for different pupil groups, has resulted in inequalities of opportunity for all pupils to access the whole curriculum.

Leaders' and governors' expectations of what some pupils can achieve are far too low. The achievement of disadvantaged pupils lags well behind other pupils nationally, despite the very high amount of additional pupil premium funding the school receives to support these pupils to catch up. Governors do not check carefully or frequently enough that the school's considerable allocation of additional funding makes an effective difference to disadvantaged pupils' achievement. This needs urgent attention so that the wide gaps in disadvantaged pupils' attainment close quickly.

Pupils' below-average attendance is also a barrier to school improvement, especially to the improvement of disadvantaged pupils' outcomes. Persistent absence overall is considerably higher than average. In 2017/18, over one fifth of pupils were regularly absent from school. Leaders are pleased that this proportion has now reduced but it still remains too high. Leaders have set a target for reducing the number of pupils who are regularly absent in the school's improvement plans. However, the school aims to reduce the very high number of pupils who are persistently absent by only two pupils each term. This shows leaders' lack of ambition to bring about the necessary improvement at a rapid enough pace. It also reflects the governing body's

lack of rigorous challenge and limited effectiveness in holding leaders to account by accepting such low expectations for improvement.

### **External support**

The local authority is aware of the improvements that are needed and provides effective challenge to the school. In March 2019, a senior local authority adviser visited the school and accurately reported variations in the quality of leadership and teaching.

The local authority supported the school's bid for extra funding for 2018/19. Although this bid was successful, the impact of this funding on bringing about school improvement has been limited. The local authority has also supported the school's bid for further funding for 2019/20. A national leader of education has been commissioned to support and challenge the school's work.

The external support offered by the local 'maths hub' and the national STEM centre has had a positive impact on sharpening the skills of the current mathematics and science subject leaders. This is helping to secure early improvements to teaching and pupils' progress in these subjects.

The school is part of the Middlesbrough Cooperative Trust. Evidence of the positive impact of this partnership is negligible.

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

Yours sincerely

Tracey Ralph

**Her Majesty's Inspector**