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Mr Duncan Gordon
St John and St Francis Church School
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Dear Mr Gordon

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St John and St Francis Church School

Following my visit to your school on 11 June 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 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:

- improve the quality of teaching of phonics and early reading
- improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in the early years.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the principal, extended leadership team, multi-academy trust chief executive officer (CEO), and the school's improvement adviser, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met with two members of the local governing board. I reviewed the school improvement plan and

leaders' evaluation of the school's performance. We made visits to classes with school leaders to observe pupils' learning and to scrutinise their work. I reviewed the impact of leaders' monitoring activities and met with a group of pupils to discuss their views of the school.

Context

A headteacher and deputy headteacher left in July 2018. A new headteacher and leader of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) took up post in September 2018. A new deputy headteacher was appointed in January 2019. Other members of the extended leadership team also took up post this year. Staffing arrangements in Reception have been volatile across this academic year, with children being taught by four teachers. A new early years leader has been appointed to start next term. Staff absence levels have been high. This monitoring visit took place 21 months after the school was graded 'requires improvement'.

Main findings

You recognise that the school needs to make further improvements. However, the complexity of staffing issues, during this academic year, has slowed the intended school improvement journey markedly. After a too slow start, current senior and middle leaders are beginning to take determined action to address the school's weaknesses.

Nevertheless, leaders and trustees have not acted quickly enough to bring about the rapid improvements needed. Leaders' actions over time are not improving pupils' achievements quickly enough.

The trustees have commissioned a raft of additional support since January 2019 to help leaders to build momentum and increase the impact of school improvement initiatives. However, there is still much reliance on this support to drive improvement forwards.

Since a teaching and learning review in March 2019, which was carried out by the CEO and the school improvement adviser, the school is improving more swiftly this term. Leaders' actions are bringing consistency to the implementation of school policies. For example, leaders have agreed the school's strategy for teaching reading across the school. Leaders are establishing better monitoring systems to check the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. However, their actions are not yet effective in addressing gaps in pupils' knowledge quickly enough. Current pupils do not make consistently good progress in reading, writing and mathematics.

Governors are beginning to act on the training they have received. However, they do not provide enough challenge against the school's improvement plans. Governors have undertaken a skills audit and the roles and responsibilities have been redefined successfully. However, it is too early to see the impact of their work.

The proportions of pupils leaving the school in 2018 with the knowledge and skills in line with their age in spelling, punctuation and grammar was much lower than that seen nationally. Pupils' attainment in reading also dipped. Pupils' attainment saw some improvements in mathematics. In key stage 1 last year, pupils' attainment remained well below that seen nationally.

Leaders have acted on the external review of the pupil premium fund appropriately. New systems are in place to track the funding and pupils' achievement. The leader of pupil premium tracks funds closely and provides detailed reports for governors. Individualised action plan 'passports' for these pupils ensure that these pupils' needs are identified and understood. Pupils and parents also contribute to these plans. However, as all pupils begin to make better progress, disadvantaged pupils are becoming further behind their peers in some year groups. Leaders' actions are not remedying the differences between disadvantaged pupils' attainment in reading and mathematics in some year groups.

Leaders' actions to reduce pupils' absence and persistent absenteeism are increasingly effective. Pupils' absence is tracked carefully. As a result, it is broadly in line with the national average. The numbers of pupils who have been excluded across the academic year has reduced. However, rates of exclusions are still too high.

The leadership of SEND is improving. Leaders who are responsible for SEND have improved the systems to identify and assess pupils' needs. A detailed action plan has been put into place just a few weeks ago to address aspects of the SEND provision that still require further work. Leaders are working on the right aspects of improvement. However, they do not yet have an incisive understanding of the progress that these pupils make in classes because they do not monitor the impact of teaching closely enough. Leaders' actions have not yet ensured that this group of pupils make consistently good progress.

Most recently, the deputy headteacher has provided a comprehensive package of coaching and support to develop the middle leaders who are new to post. This work is enabling middle leaders to carry out their monitoring checks with increasing success. These middle leaders demonstrate strong skills and knowledge to carry out their roles effectively. However, improvements in teaching are more evident in mathematics than in reading. This is because leaders' actions have not yet had sufficient time to remedy the weaknesses in teaching and pupils' underachievement. This work is just starting.

The teaching of early reading and phonics is too inconsistent. While external support is in place, the required improvements are not yet being sustained effectively.

The teaching in the early years is also too inconsistent. In 2018, the proportions of children who met the 'good level of development', the standards that are expected

at the end of the Reception Year, were below the national average. This remains unchanged this year. Teachers are being supported to strengthen their teaching, learning and assessments. However, some adults do not have the skills and knowledge to teach basic reading and phonics accurately. Consequently, a large minority of children are not yet well prepared for Year 1.

Those pupils who entered Year 1 with knowledge and skills below those expected for their age continue to make insufficient progress this year. Disadvantaged pupils continue to do far less well than their classmates.

External support

The trust has commissioned a range of external support to the school this year. Leaders and teaching staff have also benefited from visiting and working with other schools in the trust.

Currently, the school is drawing on external support for early years and the leadership of SEND. Leaders are taking full benefit of this support to improve both these aspects of the school's work. However, much of this work is only just starting. As a result, it is too early to see any discernible impact.

I am copying this letter to the chair of executive board, and the chief executive officer of the multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Bath and Wells, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Somerset. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Julie Carrington
Her Majesty's Inspector