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Mrs Angela Anderton
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Anderton

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St James Church of England Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 23 September 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the monitoring 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 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.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, senior leaders and subject leaders to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. A meeting was held with the chair of the governing body and three other governors. The school improvement plan, documents relating to governance, the curriculum and the school's evaluation of its performance were scrutinised. Lessons across all year groups were visited jointly with school leaders to observe pupils' learning. A meeting was held with a small group of pupils from Years 3 and 4.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the school has appointed a new deputy headteacher, initially in an interim role and now permanently from September 2019. Three new governors have been appointed and one governor has retired.

A new leader of the 'project group', which coordinates challenge and support to the school on behalf of the local authority, took up her role in February 2018.

Main findings

You continue to provide strong leadership for the school. You have steadily built a consensus among staff about the purpose of the curriculum. As a result, staff have a shared vision of the school's future. Staff morale is high.

Senior leaders' school improvement plans are fit for purpose. The project group has provided advice to help senior leaders sharpen these plans. They now have greater clarity about actions to be taken and how they will be monitored. You and the new deputy headteacher work together effectively. Along with the senior curriculum leader, good relationships are modelled to all staff. Consequently, staff are confident they will be supported in their roles.

The senior leadership team has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Over the last year, senior leaders consulted staff about proposals to change the curriculum. As a result of this consultation, governors and the senior leadership team have established a rationale for the curriculum that is clearly understood by staff. Subject leaders are developing curriculum plans in their areas of responsibility. While this work is well established in English and mathematics, development of the curriculum in other subjects is less advanced.

Senior leaders have provided training for staff about how to help pupils discuss different texts and use these discussions to build their own stories. Pupils can describe the process of breaking down the component parts of a story. Pupils are building on the skills they learned last year and so they are comfortable with these techniques.

Pupils' handwriting remains weak. Leaders are introducing a new approach to teaching handwriting to encourage cursive script. However, this is still at a very early stage. Many pupils have difficulty with basic spelling, punctuation and grammar. They have not yet caught up from their low starting points.

Senior leaders have ensured that teachers consider carefully the texts that they use with their classes to make sure that they are suitably demanding. As a result, pupils are now being exposed to a wider range of vocabulary. Pupils are incorporating this vocabulary into their own story writing. However, pupils lack stamina when writing and so they are not able to write at length without a break.

Senior leaders make great efforts to encourage all families to read at home. In addition, you insist that pupils read at school every day. You have changed the way pupils log their reading. All pupils now keep a reading journal to show what they have read. Pupils enjoy reading. They speak about their favourite authors with confidence. Pupils still stumble over unfamiliar words. A few pupils are reluctant to use dictionaries to check on words that they don't recognise.

The school has considerable expertise in dealing with pupils who speak English as an additional language. Twenty-one different languages are spoken by pupils at this school. Many pupils enter this school with little or no command of English. Senior leaders ensure that pupils are given suitable support if they are not able to understand English.

Pupils who struggle to read are identified early and helped with their phonics knowledge. Small group work is used to build the confidence of these pupils, particularly those pupils who have only recently arrived in the United Kingdom and may find English unfamiliar. While these interventions are helpful for pupils, they are not as effective as they should be, because they do not emphasise sufficiently the basic recognition of different letters and the sounds they make.

The provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities has improved since the previous inspection. Senior leaders have ensured that the needs of these pupils are mapped out by teachers. Individual plans have been developed and now include specific ideas about how pupils may be supported.

Staff have formed effective links with the local infant school. This has led to teachers having a good understanding of pupils' particular circumstances right from the start of their time at the school. Staff know the pupils well and can speak about individuals with confidence and conviction.

Teaching assistants have received training to improve their knowledge of the subjects that pupils are learning about. This training has increased their ability to explain ideas to pupils when they are finding the work difficult. Pupils receive good support from teaching assistants. Nevertheless, teaching assistants are not yet fully confident to take the initiative when they see an opportunity to teach a particular concept.

The school assesses pupils' attainment formally three times per year, having previously used a system of six assessments per year. Staff believe the new system has reduced their workload, while retaining the rigour of their understanding of pupils' attainment. This strategy is a proportionate use of assessment. It has enabled senior leaders to increase the amount of time spent supporting individual pupils who need to catch up with their peers.

The school now works jointly with the local infant school so that families with children in both schools have a consistent message about leaders' expectations of

good attendance. Senior leaders are ambitious for pupils to attend school more regularly. They have set up a new role for the family support worker. The school is reaching out to families and aiming to form better relationships with the families of those pupils who are persistently absent from school. Nevertheless, this initiative is in its first stages.

Senior leaders' analysis of information about pupils' attendance is currently not rigorous enough. While governors are keeping oversight of this area, senior leaders recognise that reporting of trends in the rate of pupils' attendance needs to be sharper.

External support

The school has become more outward looking since the previous inspection. The senior leadership team is open to advice and readily takes on new ideas from other schools and organisations. The project group, with new leadership from the local authority, ably supports the school in seeking support.

The school has recently received funding for coaching support from a national leader of education. Although this support has not formally started, informal links with Coney Hill School have already started to have a positive effect.

A joint initiative with the Crypt Teaching School Alliance has proved effective over the last six months. Teachers from the Crypt School regularly take lessons and so demonstrate different teaching ideas. This has led to improvement in the quality of implementation of the science curriculum in particular. Senior staff also provide advice to the Crypt School about aspects of primary education.

Senior leaders have successfully established links with National Health Service providers and the police in the local area to provide pupils with insight into these two employment sectors. These initiatives are helping to raise pupils', and particularly disadvantaged pupils', aspirations.

The board of governors and the senior leadership team have a growing capacity for school improvement. This is demonstrated by the recent award of 'mental health champion' status to the school in recognition of its work to support pupils' mental health.

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

Yours sincerely

Paul Williams

Her Majesty's Inspector