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Mrs N Kearney
Simms Cross Primary School
Kingsway
Widnes
Cheshire
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Dear Mrs Kearney

Special measures monitoring inspection of Simms Cross Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 8 and 9 October 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the 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 recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in November 2018.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and managers are not taking effective action towards the removal of special measures.

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

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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

Yours sincerely

Julie Barlow
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection that took place in November 2018.

- As a matter of urgency, improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, by ensuring that:
 - the curriculum properly equips pupils with the knowledge, skills and understanding that they need across a range of subjects to enable them to be successful in the next stage of their education
 - there is an appropriate focus on giving pupils opportunities to practise and improve their reading, writing and mathematical skills across the whole curriculum
 - middle and senior leaders gain the skills required to support the headteacher in bringing about rapid school improvement
 - additional funding is used well to improve the academic outcomes and attendance rates of disadvantaged pupils and those pupils with SEND, including those pupils who attend the specially resourced provision for pupils with SEND (specially resourced provision).
- Improve the quality of teaching in all key stages so that pupils' outcomes, across a range of subjects, improve rapidly by:
 - providing training for staff to improve their teaching knowledge and skills so that they effectively promote pupils' good progress across the curriculum
 - ensuring that there is greater consistency in the approach to teaching reading and writing, so that pupils are not confused by different approaches or left with gaps in their learning
 - ensuring teachers use assessment information effectively in order to plan lessons that match the needs and abilities of different groups of pupils, including those with SEND
 - ensuring that teachers and teaching assistants have consistently high expectations of what pupils are capable of achieving.
- Improve pupils' personal development, behaviour and welfare by:
 - improving pupils' attendance and reducing the high levels of persistent absence
 - reducing incidents of poor behaviour and the higher than average exclusion rates by ensuring that the needs of pupils who demonstrate challenging behaviour are met more effectively
 - improving pupils' attitudes to learning and ensuring that pupils take more pride in the work that they produce.

- Improve children's achievement in the early years so that they are better equipped with the skills needed for their learning in Year 1 by:
 - making sure that teaching in the early years is of a consistently good standard
 - providing children with clearer routines and expectations that support their learning across all areas of the curriculum.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

An external review of the school's use of the pupil premium should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 8 October 2019 to 9 October 2019

Evidence

I observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher and other senior leaders. I also met with four members of the local governing body, including the chair of governors, and two representatives from the local authority. I had a telephone conversation with the previous executive headteacher who led the school from March 2019 to July 2019. I spoke with a group of pupils, three groups of staff during the day and several parents at the start of the school day. The groups of staff included middle leaders, subject leaders, teachers and other staff.

I made short visits to a range of lessons and looked at pupils' work. These visits were made with senior leaders. I spoke with pupils during this time and at other times around the school. I observed pupils' behaviour around the school, at breaktime, at lunchtime and in classrooms. I also reviewed a range of documentation about pupils' attendance, safeguarding and the checks undertaken on newly appointed staff.

Context

Since the last inspection, there has been significant instability in leadership and staffing. The headteacher, deputy headteacher and a number of staff have been absent from the school. Two teachers have left the school. There has been a high proportion of temporary staff working at the school. In addition, the school's move to academy status has been further delayed. The school is still in a period of uncertainty over this.

In January 2019, the local authority commissioned the support of a local national leader of education (NLE). She provided support to the school and in March, she was appointed as a temporary executive headteacher. An experienced deputy headteacher from another local school in Warrington joined the staff to further strengthen the leadership of the school.

Delays in moving to academy status, meant that the local authority had to find new leadership for the school at the end of August 2019. They acted without delay and appointed a temporary executive headteacher from St Helens local authority. From September, there have been two new appointments to the senior leadership team, as well as an internal promotion. Several new teachers have also been appointed. There are still a number of temporary teachers working at the school due to ongoing staff absence.

Following a review of governance, there have been changes to the way that the governing body functions to make it more effective. A national leader of governance

(NLG) has now joined the governing body. He is now able to provide strategic direction and support.

The progress made by the school in tackling the key areas for improvement identified at the section 5 inspection

Turbulence in leadership and teaching has resulted in a lack of improvement to the quality of pupils' education. There are early signs that new leaders are having a positive effect on the quality of education. However, many leaders are new to their role. This means that they are only just starting to review the curriculum to ensure that it is ambitious for all pupils.

Subject leaders have not organised the curriculum in each subject well. This means that pupils do not learn new knowledge in a logical order to develop their understanding and skills over time. Therefore, pupils are unable to build upon the knowledge and skills they already have. They cannot apply their knowledge to more complex ideas. In addition, the curriculum for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) has not been adapted well enough to meet their needs. Leaders acknowledge that the curriculum is not planned well.

There are times when teachers use assessment well. Some teachers have strong subject knowledge and use this effectively to address pupils' errors and misconceptions. Some teachers provide clear explanations and useful feedback for pupils which they use to improve their learning. However, this is not strong across the school. Teachers do not routinely use assessment to inform and adapt their teaching. They do not have a clear understanding of what pupils can already do because the curriculum has not been well planned and sequenced. This contributes to new learning not building on what pupils already know so that the significant gaps in pupils' learning can be addressed.

Pupils are only just beginning to be offered more enrichment activities after school. These activities are supporting their personal development well and pupils enjoy them. Leaders want to make sure that they develop this aspect further, alongside the new curriculum.

Pupils' behaviour deteriorated shortly after the last inspection. Staff said that teaching was too difficult because of the poor behaviour of some pupils. Leaders did not deal with this matter with the urgency and rigour needed. New leaders and the local authority acted quickly in March to address this. A new behaviour policy was implemented that included clear processes for staff to follow. Leaders and staff ensure that this is followed consistently across the school.

Pupils responded well to leaders' higher expectations. Pupils understand why the changes were made and told me that their behaviour is now much better. Pupils' behaviour across the school has improved at a rapid pace. Pupils show respect for staff and each other in class and around the school. They listen well to adults and

the atmosphere in lessons is purposeful. There are fewer incidents of poor behaviour and pupils experience less disruption to their learning.

In recent years, the proportion of fixed-term exclusions has been higher than the national average. However, the improvement in pupils' behaviour has led to a fall in the number of fixed-term exclusions, including for disadvantaged pupils.

Pupils' attitudes to learning in the lessons visited were strong. Work in pupils' books is well presented and there is an improvement in pupils' handwriting in many classes. Pupils are beginning to take pride in their work.

Pupils' attendance continues to be below the national average. The local authority has supported leaders through the use of the education welfare officer, who works alongside the school's family support worker. Together, they are starting to improve parents' and carers' attitudes towards attendance. They work with individual families and provide targeted support when required. These improvements are still in their infancy and have not had the required impact on pupils' overall attendance. Leaders are aware that more needs to be done to improve pupils' attendance further.

The effectiveness of leadership and management at the school

Leaders have been hampered in their efforts to improve the school. This is mainly due to a high level of staff turbulence which has caused uncertainty. In addition, the frequent changes to when the school will convert to an academy have created further problems. Leaders have postponed many improvements, for example a new marking policy and changes to the curriculum. All these factors have had an impact on the progress that leaders and the local authority have made in order to address the areas for improvement highlighted in the last inspection.

An external review of governance took place following the last inspection. As a result, governors now have a clear understanding of their roles. They hold senior leaders to account effectively. They now check on all aspects of the school's performance more closely. During this period of turbulence and instability, governors have not been afraid to challenge leaders and make difficult decisions.

The previous executive headteacher and the current executive headteacher have created a caring and inclusive culture within the school. They have high expectations for pupils and staff which have been welcomed. This has helped to rebuild the confidence of staff and pupils. It has also been instrumental in the improvements to pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning. Pupils enjoy their learning and want to come to school.

Staff told me that they look forward to coming to work again. They are confident that senior leaders consider their workload and the challenges they face. They are fully committed to leaders' vision for the school.

Senior leaders have made sure that plans to improve the school are fit for purpose. Their plans are accurate, realistic and address those areas that inspectors identified at the previous inspection. There is a focus on improving pupils' outcomes rapidly. Leaders have prioritised their actions well. Improvement plans show that the planned actions can be measured and checked on regularly.

Most subject leaders are new to their roles. Leaders are aware of this and have plans to support staff, so they can gain the skills required to bring about rapid improvement in their areas of responsibility. A small minority of subject leaders are beginning to check the quality of pupils' learning through lesson visits and scrutiny of pupils' books. Subject leaders are keen to improve their practice.

There are more opportunities to build relationships with parents and carers. For example, staff are now visible at the start of each day to welcome pupils and their families into school. Parents who I spoke to were positive about the school. There are early signs that parents' views about the school are starting to change for the better.

The school's approach to safeguarding pupils remains effective. Staff receive regular training and updates to ensure that they know what to do if they have any concerns regarding a pupil's safety. Leaders have appropriate checks in place to make sure that staff are safe to work with pupils. Pupils I spoke to said that they feel safe and that they are happy in school.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Leaders have secured rapid improvements in pupils' behaviour and have reduced exclusion rates. Leaders ensure that systems are thorough and are used consistently across the school.
- Leaders have also improved pupils' attitudes to learning. Pupils enjoy their learning and take pride in their work.
- The quality of education in the early years is improving. The learning environment inside and outside has been planned and resourced well. Children have clear routines and expectations which support their learning.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The curriculum is not ambitious and does not meet the needs of all pupils. Significant gaps in pupils' learning remain.
- Teachers do not consistently plan learning for pupils that builds on what they already know and can do.
- The additional funding for disadvantaged pupils and pupils with SEND is not used well to improve pupils' achievement.

- Pupils' attendance at school remains low and below the national average.

External support

The local authority acted quickly to support the school since the last inspection. They commissioned support from a local NLE, who came to the school in January 2019 to support senior leaders. The local authority also commissioned support from an experienced deputy headteacher to cover the absence of the deputy headteacher. The new senior leaders provided support which had a strong impact on strengthening the senior leadership team, improving staff morale and pupils' behaviour and attitudes.

In addition, the local authority commissioned support from a specialist leader of education (SLE). During the summer term, she helped to improve the quality of education within the early years. They also provided support for some subject leaders to plan and develop the curriculum. Despite this support, these efforts have been undermined by an increase in staffing turbulence. Most subject leaders and a number of teachers are new to their roles since September 2019.

The local authority provides support for leaders to help reduce pupils' absence. This has helped to slightly improve attendance and reduce the high levels of persistent absence for some pupils. Leaders, with help from the local authority, have ensured that the school building and site are safe.

The local authority has also commissioned an external consultant to check on the quality of leaders' work. This provides an impartial evaluation of the school's progress.