

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Mrs Nicola Glover
Castlechurch Primary School
Tennyson Road
Stafford
Staffordshire
ST17 9SY

Dear Mrs Glover

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Castlechurch Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 17 December 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.

The school should take further action to:

- further improve the rates of progress made by pupils who are disadvantaged in reading, writing and mathematics
- ensure that teachers have high expectations of what all pupils, particularly the most able, can do and that they set work that deepens pupils' understanding and progressively builds on their prior learning
- ensure that curriculum leaders receive training and support so that they can plan, deliver, evaluate and review new curriculum plans in the foundation subjects
- improve pupils' knowledge, understanding and use of English grammar, punctuation and spelling (EGPS).

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the acting headteacher and leaders with responsibility for the curriculum, special educational needs and pupils who are disadvantaged to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. The inspector met with a national leader of education who has been commissioned by the local authority to support the school. The inspector met with the chair and vice-chair of the governing body. School improvement plans from the last two years were evaluated. The inspector reviewed minutes of governing body meetings, curriculum documents and records of monitoring activities. The inspector visited lessons across the school with the acting headteacher. He looked at a range of pupils' books and spoke to pupils about their work and experiences in school.

Context

Since the previous inspection, there have been some changes to staffing. The acting headteacher was appointed in June 2018 following the departure of the previous headteacher. A new headteacher has been appointed and will take up their post in January 2020. A temporary teacher has left and has not been replaced. Due to falling numbers, there are now three mixed-aged classes in Years 3 and 4.

Main findings

Castlechurch Primary School has come a long way since the last inspection in January 2018. Leaders have taken effective action to secure improvements in reading, writing and mathematics. These subjects are at the heart of the curriculum and they are developing well across the school, including in early years where they are given a high priority. The improvements made are reflected in the standards achieved in 2019 national tests, particularly at the end of key stage 2. Leaders, staff and governors are justifiably proud of these achievements.

Leaders have used assessment information precisely to formulate relevant action plans. They have ensured that all staff are aware of the school's priorities and the reasons for them. The professional development provided for teachers is closely matched to these priorities. Links have been made with other schools in a local multi-academy trust. Leaders and staff are given opportunities to visit and learn from these schools. Links are helping to improve leadership and teaching. There has been a culture shift within the school. Teachers now have higher expectations of what pupils can do.

The English curriculum has been redesigned following the school's involvement in a 'strategic school improvement fund' (SSIF) project. The English curriculum is now based on half-termly topics that are built around a text. This promotes pupils' love of reading. In pupils' books, there is some evidence of the development of English, grammar, punctuation and spelling (EGPS) skills. However, weak outcomes in national tests at the end of key stage 2 indicate that the teaching of EGPS requires

further work so that the quality of pupils' writing improves. Pupils are provided with opportunities to produce extended pieces of writing across a range of genres. However, in English lessons, pupils of all abilities are provided with work that is very similar. As a result, the most able pupils are not challenged to produce writing of a high standard. Teachers expect pupils to present their work neatly. Pupils rise to these expectations and their handwriting is consistently of a high quality. In the early years, children's early writing skills are improving because of a range of initiatives, such as 'funky fingers', that have quickly become embedded. This is having a positive impact on children's mark making and letter formation.

Leaders and staff have made the development of pupils' language a priority across the school. This is evident in the learning environment and the subject-specific language that is modelled by teachers and teaching assistants. Pupils are beginning to mirror this language when they explain their understanding of a concept.

The mathematics curriculum enables pupils to develop their arithmetical fluency, reasoning and problem-solving skills. Teachers use a range of approaches when introducing new work and concepts. This helps pupils to develop and deepen their mathematical knowledge and understanding. The work set is closely matched to pupils' needs and aptitudes. Consequently, in mathematics, pupils of all abilities are challenged effectively. Pupils take great pride in their work and make secure progress from their starting points.

Leaders and staff have started to design a curriculum that they believe will meet the needs of pupils within the school. In some of the foundation subjects, leaders have created curriculum plans that outline progression in knowledge and skills across each year group. This helps teachers to know what to teach and when to teach it. It also supports them to plan lessons that build on pupils' prior learning. These plans are in the early stages of development and will need refining as the year progresses. Also, there are some subjects, such as computing, that have not yet been considered. Curriculum leaders of these subjects require training and support so that they can devise and lead the development of their curriculum plans. As the curriculum develops, leaders and staff are keen to create more purposeful cross-curricular links to reinforce English and mathematics skills in other subjects.

Currently, pupils who are disadvantaged do not achieve as well as their peers. Leaders and staff are aware of this. They have implemented a range of initiatives, such as class context sheets and a more focused use of support staff. However, the impact of these actions cannot be seen, and more work needs to be done. All staff need to have consistently high expectations of pupils who are disadvantaged.

Governors have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. This understanding is supported by the range of information that is provided to them by the acting headteacher and other leaders. Governors have high expectations and they hold leaders to account. Currently, governors are implementing systems to improve their knowledge and understanding of the new

curriculum. They have completed relevant training to support their roles and responsibilities.

There is a calm atmosphere around the school that is underpinned by a positive approach to behaviour management. This approach is used consistently across the school and is understood by pupils. Pupils of all ages are engaged in their learning. They say that they enjoy lessons in a range of subjects. Pupils feel safe. The development of independent learning has been a whole-school priority and it is clearly bearing fruit. Pupils are aware of the different strategies they can use when they need help with their work, such as asking someone on their table for help. Also, a range of support materials are readily available on the walls, on the desks and around the classrooms. Pupils say, 'We learn lots of different things in our lessons. Our school is a happy place to be in and our teachers look after us.'

The school has been on a journey of improvement. Leaders are working tirelessly to ensure that pupils receive better provision in a range of areas. School development plans are detailed and focused on the key areas for improvement. They are reviewed regularly and adapted when required. However, leaders are not complacent. They are aware that there is more work to be done and they are clear about their next steps.

External support

The local authority commissioned a national leader of education to support the school and oversee the SSIF project. The national leader has continued to provide support, particularly in relation to leadership. This partnership is proving to be valuable and is supporting the school to move forwards. The school engages well with the support and it is having a positive impact on provision and outcomes, especially in reading, writing and mathematics.

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

Yours sincerely

Wayne Simner

Her Majesty's Inspector