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13 January 2020

Mrs Joanne Shephard
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Dear Mrs Shephard

Serious weaknesses first monitoring inspection of Mercenfeld Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 10 December 2019, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and 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 most recent section 5 inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses in October 2018. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Following the monitoring inspection, the following judgements were made:

Leaders and managers are taking effective actions towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

The school's improvement plan is fit for purpose.

The trust's statement of action is fit for purpose.

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

Yours sincerely

Hazel Henson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the impact of leadership and management to secure sustained improvement by ensuring that:
 - senior and subject leaders carry out thorough and regular checks on the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, including the consistent application of school policies such as on teachers' feedback to pupils
 - senior and subject leaders use the outcomes of their checks to hold teachers to account for pupils' progress and attainment
 - the curriculum is well planned and taught in all key stages, and enables pupils to be fully prepared for the next phase of their education
 - subject leaders are consistently effective across all areas of the curriculum
 - pupils receive effective spiritual, moral, social and cultural education and that they have a secure understanding of British values
 - standards of disadvantaged pupils rapidly increase through senior leaders and governors establishing clear and precisely targeted plans for spending the additional pupil premium funding
- Improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment so that pupils attain more highly and make strong progress, by ensuring that teachers:
 - use accurate assessments to set work that is consistently well matched to pupils' abilities
 - have consistently high expectations of the quality of pupils' work and insist on high standards of presentation
 - improve pupils' behaviour by eradicating instances of low-level disruption in lessons
 - urgently improve outcomes for pupils in key stages 1 and 2, especially in writing, including for pupils who are disadvantaged and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)
 - improve the quality of teaching and resources in early years, ensuring that the outdoor learning area effectively supports children's development across all areas of learning.

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 10 December 2019

Evidence

This inspection focused on the areas for improvement relating to leadership and management and the quality of education which pupils receive, as well as behaviour and attitudes. The inspector observed the school's work and scrutinised documents, including the school's development plan.

The inspector met with the headteacher and the executive headteacher. She met subject leaders, the early years leader and the coordinator for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SENCo). The inspector met with the director of schools for the Bradgate Education Partnership and the chair of the local advisory board.

She met with a group of pupils, scrutinised examples of pupils' workbooks and visited some lessons with leaders.

Context

The school became an academy in the Bradgate Education Partnership on 1 September 2019. Prior to the school joining, the trust provided support for the school from January 2019. The executive headteacher has been seconded from another school within the trust. She has supported the school on a part-time basis since February 2019.

There have been several changes to the teaching staff. There has been a restructuring of the roles of support staff. A new school business manager has been appointed.

Since the school joined the Bradgate Education Partnership, the governing body has been reorganised and is now a local advisory board. The organisation of the school has changed. There are now 14 classes, none of which are mixed-age group classes.

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

Leaders have worked systematically to review and improve both leadership and management and the quality of education across the school. Governors and the director of schools from the trust have regularly checked that improvement actions have been carried out.

Leaders have reviewed their approach to improving pupils' behaviour, including revising the school's behaviour policy. Leaders have made sure that this is followed more consistently in each class. Teachers have high expectations of how pupils will behave in class. No low-level disruption was observed during the monitoring visit.

Pupils were eager to work and concentrated well. However, pupils told the inspector that sometimes pupils do disturb others. Leaders have plans to track how amber cards and warnings are used more closely. They have appointed leaders who will make these checks next term.

Leaders have prioritised improving the quality of teaching in writing. Following training, staff are now ensuring that they are using an approach that is consistent between classes. Teachers carefully choose the texts that they read to the classes. They make sure that they contain features that they want pupils to learn about. For example, one member of staff had rewritten the story of 'The Tin Soldier' so that it was just right for her class. Teachers model writing so that pupils can understand what they should be aiming for. Pupils practise how they are going to tell the story or write their account. Pupils' confidence is growing, and they are eager to write, edit and improve their work.

Subject leaders check to make sure that the training that staff have received has made a difference. For example, they have scrutinised the quality of writing in pupils' books. This has helped them to suggest changes that could make the teaching of writing even better. Leaders have made sure that pupils get appropriate feedback about their work, which helps them to improve. Pupils told me that they now know what they need to do to make their writing better. Most pupils are proud of their work and want it to be the best that it can be, but there are still occasions when their presentation slips.

Staff have received training to improve their subject knowledge in mathematics. They now have a better understanding of what pupils know and what they need to learn next. Pupils told the inspector that they enjoy the challenges in mathematics lessons. They feel that these have improved over the last year. Pupils' achievement in mathematics is increasing. Last year, more pupils were well prepared for the next stage of their education, by the end of Year 6, than was previously the case.

Leaders have raised teachers' expectations of the standards that pupils can achieve. Teachers have visited other schools to consider how they can improve their practice. This has helped leaders in early years to organise the classroom better. Teachers plan purposeful activities which support children's learning in the early years. All staff know what children are learning that week. They make sure that children get the chance to practise this in different ways. Leaders have made sure that what children learn in mathematics and English in their first year of school builds the foundations for what they will go on to learn in Year 1. Leaders have started to improve the range of resources that children can access when learning outside.

Leaders have not yet made sure that the teaching of phonics is consistently effective. Last year fewer pupils reached the standard of the phonics screening check at the end of Year 1 than the year before. Too few pupils gained the knowledge that they need to become fluent early readers. Leaders have not yet ensured that all staff have the subject knowledge that they need to help pupils to

build on what they already know in phonics.

There are many opportunities for pupils to learn about life in modern Britain. Teachers help pupils to understand the importance of debating ideas, voting on them and other aspects of living in a democracy. Pupils learn about the 20 key values that the school has identified. Each week, one of these is introduced as a focus in assembly. Examples of where pupils demonstrate this value are celebrated on Fridays. Pupils reflect on how they can be kind to each other. They enjoy learning about different religions. For example, pupils described making dream-catchers and finding out more about Native American spirituality and culture. They are confident when they explain their own beliefs, and listen to each other with respect.

The review of how pupil premium funding is spent has taken place. Leaders are using the recommendations that have been made to make changes. For example, they have plans to improve the attendance of disadvantaged pupils.

Leaders know that there is still much to do to develop the wider curriculum. They have begun to evaluate what is currently in place. Teachers are beginning to create a new framework for learning in each year group. Training has begun to help them with this. However, the development of the wider curriculum in all subjects is at an early stage.

The effectiveness of leadership and management at the school

The leadership team know the areas in which the school needs to improve further. They have written detailed improvement plans which exemplify their ambition to continue to raise standards. The current plan has appropriate priorities. However, not all of these are sharply focused. This includes the work which is going on to improve the quality of the teaching of phonics and develop the wider curriculum.

Leaders have provided support for the English and mathematics leaders to understand and undertake their responsibilities. These subject leaders have evaluated the changes that have taken place and understand what needs to improve next. Opportunities for the moderation of pupils' work have helped teachers to raise their expectations of what pupils can do and established more consistency in assessment. Teachers understand better what pupils can achieve.

Wider subject leadership is at an earlier stage of development. Leaders are aware of this, and plan to address this in the near future. Leaders are ambitious for pupils with SEND and have made changes to help pupils do as well as they can. They have established 'the beehive' to help pupils to learn to manage their feelings and continue to make progress in their learning. They have made effective use of partnerships with other schools to make sure that pupils receive the support that they need.

Governors ask challenging questions. They say that communication with senior

leaders has improved and that they find out more valuable information about the school. They use this to check that leaders are doing the things that they said that they would. They have a good understanding about the progress that the school is making. Regular checks undertaken by leaders, including those from the trust, have accurately evaluated the improvements which have taken place in writing and mathematics.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The executive headteacher and headteacher understand what the school needs to do to improve next. They are ambitious for pupils and highly inclusive in their approach.
- Leaders are building a leadership team which is strengthening the quality of teaching and learning. They have prioritised what needs to be done. They manage change well.
- The support from the teaching school alliance and the Bradgate Education Partnership provides staff with training to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Leaders make good use of the partnerships that they are developing.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- New systems of subject leadership are not yet embedded throughout the school. Leadership of some subjects is at a much earlier stage. Some leaders need further training to develop and implement a curriculum which is well organised and ambitious in their subject area.
- Some areas for improvement have not been as well addressed as others. For example, leaders have not yet improved the outdoor environment so that it effectively supports children's learning. Leaders have plans of the changes that they want to make, but these have not yet taken place.

External support

The school has benefitted from support from the STEP Teaching Learning Alliance. Mathematics and English subject leaders have attended network meetings which have developed their subject knowledge. Specialist leaders in education have strengthened leaders' self-evaluation.

Effective support has been brokered from within the Bradgate Education Partnership. The appointment of the executive headteacher has strengthened the leadership of the school and provided clarity of understanding about what the school does well and what it still needs to improve.