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Louise Probets and Simon Robson
Interim Executive Headteachers
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Dear Mrs Probets and Mr Robson

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Middleham Church of England Aided School

Following my visit to your school on 12 May 2021, 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(2) of the Education Act 2005 and has taken place because the school has received three successive judgements of requires improvement at its previous section 5 inspections.

This was the first routine inspection the school received since the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic began. I discussed the impact of the pandemic with you and have taken that into account in my evaluation.

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

Leaders and those responsible for governance are not taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- act upon the findings from the forthcoming safeguarding review to strengthen safeguarding practice
- ensure all staff are trained to deliver an effective phonics programme consistently
- develop the subject expertise of staff in the wider curriculum to improve the quality of education pupils receive
- ensure that governors have the knowledge and skills to hold leaders to account and to test out the information leaders give them.

Context

The previous headteacher left the school at Easter 2021. A new headteacher has been appointed and will take up post in September 2021. Two interim executive headteachers are in place to lead the school until the new headteacher arrives.

Main findings

Over time, the school has not made sufficient progress towards becoming a good school. A number of previously identified areas for improvement remain a priority. Additional areas for improvement have also arisen. There have been mitigating factors. External support has been affected by COVID-19. Staffing changes have made improvement more challenging. Nevertheless, actions to carry out improvement and check effectiveness have not been sufficiently strong.

As interim executive headteachers, you are taking responsibility for the school at a time of significant change. You are checking many aspects of the school's work. You have commissioned reviews of safeguarding, reading and governance. You plan to use the findings from these reviews to accelerate and focus improvement.

Leaders have secured improvement in aspects of reading. Teachers now match books to the sounds pupils have learned. Pupils say that they are encouraged to read more widely. Those parents who expressed a view value the guidance to help their child read at home. However, action to ensure that all staff are consistent in the teaching of phonics has been less successful. While some teachers model sounds well, follow-on tasks do not consistently reinforce the links between letters and sounds.

The early years curriculum still requires further improvement. Children listen well when their teachers demonstrate new learning. However, they are less focused in their wider learning and play. On occasions, children flit between tasks that do not enable them to practise and build on what they know. Opportunities for children to develop their reading, writing and mathematics are not fully developed.

You are carrying out an audit of subject leadership. Although curriculum plans are in place, staff have had limited opportunities to help them to develop subjects in the wider curriculum. This is limiting the capacity for further improvement and contributing to variability in the quality of education.

You have commissioned a review of safeguarding practice. You recently became aware of gaps in staff training and have taken swift action to address these. During the inspection, we identified gaps in safeguarding records that made it difficult to track how concerns had been addressed in the past. You have put new systems in place to address these. You have brought in additional assurances to check that pupils are safe. You also plan to act upon any findings from the forthcoming safeguarding review.

Parents remain highly supportive of the school. They appreciate the care and support of staff. They valued the additional support over the period when many children were educated from home. Parents feel that their children are happy and safe. Pupils praise the school and the support of their teachers. They feel that behaviour is very good. There is evidence of strong support in the school community upon which further improvement can be built.

Two previous monitoring inspections stressed the need for governors to hold leaders to account more effectively. Governors acknowledge that this has not happened. Governors are committed to the school and are keen to secure further improvement. They are using the external views of the interim headteachers to bring extra assurance to governance. They are also working with a diocesan adviser to review governance. They plan to use the outcomes from this review to provide better support and challenge in the future.

Leaders and local authority partners described how the school's improvement journey has been fragmented over time. The school is now working more closely with the local authority, the diocese and a local trust. These recent developments are creating a stronger capacity for future improvement.

Additional support

Over time, additional support has had mixed impact. It has not provided sufficient external assurance of the quality of education or governance. Initial support with reading helped leaders to match books to the sounds that pupils learned. However, this training has not been consistently developed for all staff.

Partnership work with local hubs has enabled teachers to develop greater expertise in aspects of the English and mathematics curriculum. Partnerships with other schools have contributed towards the development of the wider curriculum. Teachers continue to work with other schools to check the quality of pupils' work.

From Easter 2021, stronger partnerships have been put in place. Improvement partners from the local authority and the diocese are working together for the first time to provide support and check improvement. They have brokered support from two headteachers from the Dales Academies Trust. These actions are creating a more secure base for improvement.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with both interim executive headteachers, three members of staff and talked to one teacher remotely to discuss the changing school context and the actions taken since the last inspection.

I undertook lesson visits to the combined Reception and Year 1 class and the Year 5 and Year 6 class. I also discussed attendance and aspects of safeguarding. I met a group of Year 5 and Year 6 pupils to discuss behaviour, safety and the curriculum. I met three members of the governing body, including the chair. I also held a remote meeting with two senior improvement officers from the local authority and the diocesan school improvement partner. I looked at improvement plans and safeguarding documents. I also looked at some examples of work in pupils' books.

I considered 14 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 10 free-text responses, and nine staff questionnaires.

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

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Kirtley
Her Majesty's Inspector