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Rachel Hocking
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Dear Mrs Hocking

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Swalwell Primary 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 two 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 taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- ensure that curriculum planning across all wider curriculum subjects is developed to match that seen in the core subjects and science
- ensure that the next school improvement plan sets out how leaders will systematically check whether the revised curriculum is helping pupils to know more and remember more
- ensure that adults help weaker readers to read more fluently, by focusing on whole words, phrases and sentences as well as individual sounds, when working one-to-one with children.

Context

During the autumn term 2020, a small number of pupils were educated remotely for short periods when they were self-isolating. A 'bubble' of children had to be educated remotely during February, when the school was partially open to some pupils. Some planned actions designed to improve the school have been delayed due to COVID-19. The school improvement plan has been amended to indicate how these actions will resume across the summer term.

You took up the post of headteacher in September 2019. The two assistant headteachers, who were previously acting as co-headteachers, returned to their substantive roles and remain in post. One assistant headteacher is currently on maternity leave. A temporary assistant headteacher has been seconded to work in the school on a part-time basis. Since the previous inspection, two teachers have left the school and two new early career teachers have been appointed. There have been no changes to the governing body.

Main findings

You and other leaders are taking the fundamental actions needed to improve the school. The improvements have been recognised by parents. Their responses to Ofsted's online survey, Parent View, show that they feel the school has made positive strides since you took up post. They welcome improvements in teaching and praise the way the school makes learning accessible for every child. Your leadership has united the staff. Everyone is pulling together. There is a clear sense of direction.

In September last year, you began teaching a revised curriculum in reading, writing and mathematics, following a review. Staff received the training they needed to implement these new curriculum plans. During the national lockdown, you made some adaptations to the curriculum. Since all pupils returned to school in March 2021, you have checked for any gaps in their knowledge. This term, your recovery curriculum is designed to ensure that any missed topics are covered and that any gaps in knowledge are addressed. You intend to resume teaching the planned curriculum from September 2021.

Some work you had intended to do has been delayed. Work to review the curriculum in some subjects, such as computing, has not happened. Consequently, the quality of the wider curriculum remains variable. There are some emerging strengths. In science, there are well-written curriculum plans. The content is well sequenced. As a result, pupils are developing scientific knowledge effectively. The development of the science curriculum provides a useful blueprint for what needs to happen in other subjects. In contrast, curriculum plans in geography and history need further work to ensure that appropriate subject-specific content is taught effectively.

You acknowledge that the disrupted year has prevented you and other leaders from properly checking whether the new curriculum is helping pupils to know more and remember more. We agreed that it is essential this is done in a systematic way once you complete your recovery curriculum.

It is clear that the teaching of reading has a raised profile. During the national lockdown, teachers made every effort to maintain phonics teaching through remote, recorded lessons. Nevertheless, children in the Reception Year and in key stage 1 are behind where you would expect them to be. Teachers are working hard to ensure that pupils catch up. They are ensuring that the books pupils are given match the sounds they know. However, some weaker readers need more help and support to read their books fluently. You are taking steps to raise the profile of reading further. Books are now more visible around school and you are developing a virtual library so that pupils will have better access to books from home.

In the 2019 inspection, the early years provision was judged to require improvement. You quickly took steps to sharpen up the learning activities. You made sure that opportunities for children to develop their early reading, writing and mathematical knowledge were organised better. However, you have noticed that the disruption to schooling over the last year has had the greatest impact on children in the early years. As a result, you have split the Nursery and Reception-age children into different classes so that their differing needs can be better met. This approach is at an early stage. You acknowledge that further work is needed to make sure the curriculum is progressive across the Nursery and Reception and lays the foundation for national curriculum subjects in Year 1.

Attendance was identified as an area to improve in the last inspection. You revised your attendance policy and put in place tight systems to track and respond to any absences. The introduction of a 'walking bus' improved attendance and punctuality prior to the pandemic. Your newsletters continue to stress the importance of good attendance. A recent effort to target weaker attenders brought marked improvements. This year, the number of pupils who are persistently absent has declined considerably.

Governors provide good support and challenge to you. They have sensitively managed to keep you focused on improving the school. Like you, they are frustrated that COVID-19 has delayed some planned improvement activities. They ensure that

their statutory responsibilities, such as those relating to the teaching of relationships and sex education, are carefully considered. They provide effective scrutiny. For example, they looked carefully at the remote education offer and currently are checking on changes being made to early year provision.

Additional support

The local authority has provided ongoing support since the last inspection. The link adviser has visited frequently and has been supported by a number of subject consultants. The school has made good use of this support, particularly to refine and develop curriculum planning and to develop skills of subject leadership. This is helping to improve the quality of education.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and other senior leaders, a representative of the local authority, the curriculum leader for science and a group of pupils. I also met the chair and three other members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I checked the school's single central register, visited the Nursery and Reception classes, visited phonics sessions and observed adults reading with pupils. I looked at pupils' workbooks for science and for topic (history and geography). I also looked at the minutes of governing body meetings and at attendance information.

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

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector