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Lisa Dale
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Dear Mrs Dale

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Howbridge Church of England Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 08 June 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 2020-21 COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. I discussed the impact of the pandemic with the school 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.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the structure of the senior leadership team has changed. There are now two assistant headteachers, rather than one deputy headteacher. One of the assistant headteachers is also the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) who joined the school in January 2021. A local schools' board

(LSB) replaced the governing body in September 2020. This is led by a new chair of governors.

Main findings

The headteacher is clear where strengths lie in the school's provision, as well as what still needs to improve. The school improvement plan focuses on the right actions and has appropriate timescales in which to achieve them.

Curriculum plans show careful consideration of the knowledge and skills that pupils should learn and in what order. Curriculum leaders have also made sure that there are opportunities to revisit essential learning. However, the delivery of the plans in all subjects is in the early stages of development. Leaders say they need a period without interruptions caused by the pandemic to apply the curriculum throughout the school. This is so they can review the curriculum in its entirety. Leaders are also continuing to work on the development of pupils' subject vocabulary. Currently, pupils struggle to recall the vocabulary and key knowledge they have learned in the different subjects. They tend to remember the activity and say that it was fun.

Leaders are making headway with improvements to the education of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). There was a slow start after the previous inspection due to the turnover of staffing in various roles, as well as senior leaders coping with the impact of the pandemic. Leadership of SEND is now stable, and improvements are gaining momentum. Teachers understand more clearly how to cater for individual needs in their classes due to bespoke training to support them in their work. Curriculum leaders are ensuring pupils with SEND access the curriculum. Parents are positive about the changes. Parents are typically of the view that their child is getting appropriate support. They also say that communication has improved.

Reading is a strong focus in the curriculum. Books are deliberately chosen to enrich pupils' knowledge in the foundation subjects, as well as provide enjoyment. Pupils told me that they love reading. They explain well the different genres they have read and the features that caught their interest. Pupils who are in the early stages of learning to read are well supported. Books that pupils read match the sounds they know. Leaders check closely pupils' phonics knowledge so they can pick up quickly any misconceptions. Pupils benefit from regular phonics instruction in their English lessons and read to an adult regularly.

Governors have supported leaders throughout the pandemic. They have also checked on the well-being and workload of staff during this time. Governors have continued to ask the right questions about school improvement. While they have not visited the school due to the restrictions in place, they have continued to hold their meetings virtually. Governors have checked on the improvements that have been

made. This has helped to inform their understanding of the impact of the changes so they can hold leaders to account.

Additional support

The support provided by the trust is highly valued by school leaders. Senior leaders belong to trust networks and curriculum leaders have received training in curriculum development and leadership. This has helped leaders to improve their curriculum planning. Leaders are making use of the latest educational research to inform their approach to curriculum development and assessment.

The headteacher is supported in her evaluation of school improvement by a national leader for education. This has helped to confirm the headteacher's findings from her monitoring, as well as provide a sounding board for next steps.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the headteacher, representatives of those responsible for governance, and representatives from the multi-academy trust to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

I also met with the SENCo, curriculum leaders and pupils. I observed pupils reading to staff. I spoke to a sample of parents of pupils with SEND. I considered documentation and the school's website. I took account of 80 responses to the Ofsted survey, Parent View, including 39 free-text comments. I reviewed 38 responses to the Ofsted staff survey.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the LSB, the chair of the board of trustees, and the chief executive officer of the Diocese of Chelmsford Vine Academies Trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Chelmsford, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Essex. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Liz Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector