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Emma Baxter
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Dear Miss Baxter

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Elms Farm Community Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 17 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 began. 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.

The school should take further action to:

- improve pupils' language skills so that the increasingly challenging curriculum is more readily accessible to them

- ensure that governors strengthen their understanding how the school's motto of 'Ambition, Community and Equality' is threaded through policies, practice, curriculum plans and pupils' experiences
- support subject leaders to embed new curriculum plans, monitor their implementation and evaluate the impact.

Context

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, staff have supported families with practical help and regular visits, phone calls and laptops to help children learn at home. Staff say this has helped to build stronger relationships with families. Parents say that staff go 'above and beyond' to help them. Pupils' attendance has been adversely affected by the pandemic, and staff are working hard with parents to stress the importance of pupils attending every day. This is starting to have an impact on the attendance of individual pupils.

Since the school's last inspection, the leadership team has changed considerably. Following the retirement of the previous headteacher at the end of the spring term 2021, you took up the post of headteacher, and a new deputy headteacher joined the school. Other key appointments include a new leader of the wider curriculum and English leaders for key stage 1 and key stage 2. Following the retirement of the previous early years leader, the new deputy headteacher now leads on early years, phonics and early reading. Learning mentors have been appointed to add capacity to the pastoral team, which is now line managed by the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo).

Main findings

At the last full inspection, leaders were asked to improve pupils' attendance, the quality of education and the quality of leadership and management. In your new role as headteacher, you have continued to drive improvement, pushing expectations further, focusing on reviewing the curriculum and strengthening subject leadership.

The quality of education is improving. This is largely due to a rigorous and systematic review of the curriculum led by senior leaders and the new leader for the wider curriculum. Subject leaders now take responsibility for revising the curriculum plans in their subject. They support teachers to deliver the new plans effectively by providing training and support. In lessons, teachers now use consistent approaches to help pupils recall their previous learning. Pupils say this helps them to remember the key facts in each subject. The recently developed assessment framework for the wider curriculum is helping leaders to check pupils' progress more effectively. Subject leaders do not yet check how teachers are delivering the new curriculum plans.

Pupils love reading. They learn to read quickly in the Reception and Year 1 class, because there is a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics and all staff have received relevant training. In phonics sessions, staff use effective strategies consistently to support pupils' learning. For example, pupils practise speaking and writing each sound until they know it securely. Teachers check pupils' understanding frequently to identify which pupils need more practice. Pupils who need extra help to improve their reading receive intensive support in small groups with an expert teacher so that they catch up quickly.

You are committed to investing in staff. Teachers now have bespoke training and support, tailored to their needs. Staff attend subject networks and plan together in year groups with expert support. For example, in English, staff receive support from a local English Hub. Teachers also benefit from expert curriculum guidance through professional subject associations. As a result, teachers are discussing pupils' learning and the curriculum plans more confidently.

You have identified that pupils need more help to develop their language skills and vocabulary. In English lessons, teachers now give pupils more opportunities to discuss their ideas before they start writing. Pupils help each other to find the right words and compose their writing. In all subjects, teachers make sure that relevant key words are taught, and they provide greater opportunities for writing. Teachers often ask pupils to justify their answers. Most pupils can now confidently describe what they have learned. However, some pupils find it hard to explain their thinking because they struggle to find the right words. These pupils lack some of the language and communication skills to achieve the higher expectations of the new, more challenging curriculum.

Governors are developing approaches to monitoring and evaluation that will help them to hold leaders to account more rigorously. Governors visit school to get a better understanding of the new curriculum plans. The school's motto, 'Ambition, Community, Equality' permeates many aspects of school life. Governors were not able to explain clearly how the motto is reflected in pupils' experiences.

Pupils are safe in this school. The pastoral team knows the children and their families well and provides comprehensive support when it is needed. Staff work closely with external teams to make sure pupils get the right help at the right time. Parents particularly valued the support provided during the national lockdowns. One parent's view reflected many parents' comments: 'I've always appreciated all the staff do at this school. But this year even more so. My child is very happy here and is always happy to skip through the doors and see her teachers.'

The school's plans to become a good school identify the correct priorities. You check the school's progress in regular leadership team meetings. The school improvement plan does not include intended goals. As a result, leaders and governors are unclear about what is expected to change as a result of leaders' actions.

It is too early to see the full impact of the revised curriculum plans. Subject leaders do not check how teachers are implementing the new plans or evaluate the impact on pupils' learning.

Recent leadership changes are bringing a fresh view of the school's systems and procedures. Things are changing rapidly, and staff embrace these changes and improvements enthusiastically. As a result of your vision, they are committed to bringing about change for the better. Staff say they feel valued and are encouraged to try new approaches. Staff appreciate leaders' support.

Additional support

You have prioritised support for subject leaders, holding them to account for progress against the action plans for their subject. This is helping subject leaders become more effective in their roles. They are enthusiastic and knowledgeable. They know that getting the right curriculum in place is crucial, ensuring that pupils are learning and remembering the most important things, in the right order. An external adviser provides external support for middle leaders to develop in their roles.

Leaders and other staff value the training and support provided by a local English Hub. The external adviser chairs regular monitoring meetings to check on the progress the school is making towards becoming a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior leaders, subject leaders, pupils, pastoral staff and the SENCo, governors and the school improvement adviser, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection.

Before the inspection, I reviewed the school improvement plan and the school evaluation document. I read the previous inspection report and the reports from two monitoring visits. During the inspection, I checked the school's records of pre-employment checks and looked at work in pupils' books. I heard pupils reading and spoke to pupils and staff at lunchtime about safeguarding and behaviour.

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

Yours sincerely

Jane Spilsbury
Her Majesty's Inspector