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Dear Ms Jordan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Thorns Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 29 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 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 the key subject knowledge, skills and vocabulary are mapped out in all subjects from the early years to Year 6 to enable pupils to build on prior learning.

- help staff to check effectively what pupils know and remember in each subject before moving on to new learning.
- ensure that all subject leaders have the knowledge, skills and understanding to evaluate the impact of their curriculum plans.

Context

This is the first on-site monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement. The school received a remote monitoring inspection in February 2021.

Since the previous inspection, there have been substantial changes to staffing and governance. Leadership responsibilities have been reallocated. A number of subject leaders are new to their role. Seven new governors have been appointed, including a chair and vice-chair of governors.

Leaders feel that there has been some disruption to the plans for school improvement during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, plans are now back on track. During spring 2021, further adaptations had to be made to the curriculum, so that learning could continue while most pupils were working at home. Towards the end of the spring term, the whole school was forced to close due to the pandemic.

Main findings

Leaders have focused sharply on taking the necessary actions to improve the quality of education, staying faithful to the main priorities. This single-mindedness has brought clarity to school improvement planning. Changes have taken place in staffing and governance, together with a restructure of leaders' responsibilities. This has helped concentrate efforts on what matters most. During several periods of closure, linked to COVID-19, some curriculum improvements were delayed. However, leaders have made up for lost time.

Leaders have high aspirations and expectations of pupils. Their vision for a curriculum that develops pupils academically, socially and emotionally drives improvement across the school. This vision is shared by staff, and they are proud to work at the school. Pupils are enthusiastic learners and relish learning in different subjects.

The reading curriculum has improved since the previous inspection. Pupils' progress in phonics is checked regularly and extra help is given to any pupils who need to catch up. Pupils who receive extra support develop effective strategies to read words with increasing fluency. Books that younger pupils read in school match the sounds that they are learning. Pupils talk with excitement about the broad range of different authors and books available. They also discuss books which are read to them, and books linked to different subjects, such as history. These activities are helping to broaden pupils' subject knowledge. Revisions have been made to the

teaching of reading comprehension. Pupils now have a better understanding of what they are reading.

Leaders' chosen approach to teaching mathematics has become well developed across the school. Leaders have revised the mathematics curriculum to ensure that pupils have secure knowledge before moving on to new topics. Staff have received training and regularly challenge pupils to think more deeply. Most teachers revisit important knowledge. They check pupils' understanding and adapt what they do in lessons. Pupils start most lessons with a short practice of what they have been previously taught. The leader of mathematics continues to provide guidance to support the teaching of mathematics.

There is still more work to do to develop the curriculum for subjects other than English and mathematics. Leaders have planned what they want pupils to know and be able to do for each curriculum subject, but this planning lacks detail and clarity. Leaders have started to develop more precise plans so that new teaching can build on what pupils already know. This work remains at an early stage. Pupils show some knowledge of remembering what they have learned but this is stronger in some subjects than others.

You recognise that leadership of the wider curriculum needs to be strengthened. Some subject leaders do not have the knowledge and skills to evaluate the impact of the curriculum plans. Some work on this has already started, for example in design technology. More work is required so that the effectiveness of leadership across the wider curriculum matches that seen in English and mathematics.

Provision in the early years has improved. In Reception, children follow a curriculum that provides rich experiences to extend their skills and vocabulary. They are enthusiastic about what they learn. Staff regularly check what pupils know and can do and modify the curriculum appropriately to meet their needs.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities study the same curriculum as other pupils. They receive effective support which meets their needs. Teaching assistants support pupils well.

Since the previous inspection, you have reviewed your systems for checking how well teachers deliver the curriculum. You have identified where staff require further support. You ensure that they have professional development opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge.

Governors are well informed about the school's strengths and weaknesses. They have supported you to make important changes, such as the development of new leadership roles. Governors are developing their understanding of the curriculum. This will enable them to hold all leaders to account more effectively.

Additional support

The school has benefited from being part of an English hub and a mathematics hub. This has led to improved expertise in the teaching of phonics and mathematics. Work with an external consultant is supporting the development of leadership skills and teaching and learning behaviours. The local authority is aware of the school's priorities and plans for improvement.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, two assistant headteachers, subject leaders, members of staff and four members of the governing body to discuss the actions taken since the last section 5 inspection. I also spoke to a representative of the local authority and an external consultant.

I observed phonics teaching and heard pupils read to support staff. I scrutinised school action plans and the school self-evaluation document. I reviewed the minutes of governing body meetings and responses to the staff and parent questionnaires. I examined the school's single central record of background checks that leaders make on staff's suitability to work with children prior to employment. I met with two separate groups of pupils to talk about the quality of education. I also looked at curriculum plans and pupils' books.

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

Yours sincerely

Lynda Townsend
Ofsted Inspector