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Seren Hathway
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Hathway

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Whaley Bridge Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 15 July 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 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:

- ensure that subject leaders have the knowledge that they need to lead the implementation of the new curriculum that they have written. Leaders should make sure that this matches the scope and ambition of the national curriculum.

- They should check what pupils remember and that they can connect what they are learning now with the knowledge they gained before.

Context

The headteacher took up her position in November 2020. With the previous headteacher appointed as deputy headteacher, they formed a new senior leadership team. Since the previous inspection, there has been some turbulence in staffing. This has delayed some of the plans for improvement that leaders had made.

Since the wider reopening of schools in March 2021, pupils' attendance has been high. Although individual staff and pupils have needed to self-isolate, no pupils in year-group 'bubbles' have had to learn from home. At the time of the visit, the proportion of pupils absent because they were having to self-isolate had begun to increase.

Main findings

Leaders have wasted no time in improving the teaching of phonics. They have acted swiftly and decisively to adopt a programme which uses a systematic way to teach pupils to decode text. Training has taken place, and more is planned so that all staff become early reading experts. Lessons focus rigorously on pupils acquiring the knowledge of the sounds that letters make. Teachers make sure that this builds on what pupils learned the day before. Pupils listen attentively and can explain how the sounds that they are learning make up words. Teachers make sure that books are more closely matched to what pupils know. This is helping pupils to become more fluent readers. Leaders have not yet established their expectations of what sounds pupils will know and by when. Developing this is part of the work leaders will be doing with staff as they embed this new curriculum further.

Changes have been made to the school's writing curriculum. Pupils say that they have learned more about how to write well. They like the fact that they get help straight away. Teachers appreciate the training that they have had. They say that it is making a difference. Leaders have identified what parts of the curriculum pupils have missed during lockdown. They have worked with staff to make sure that pupils have had the chance to catch up before the end of the school year. Assessments are planned to check that all these gaps have been filled.

Leaders have had to make some changes to the organisation of classes during the year. This has meant that some of the work on developing the wider curriculum has not yet taken place. Some subject leaders have made a start on reviewing what is taught in their subjects. They have spoken with pupils to see what they can remember. Professional development has helped subject leaders to write plans for improvements. However, not all subject leaders have yet identified the core knowledge that they want pupils to learn. Their work writing a coherent, well-sequenced curriculum is not yet complete. As a result, what pupils can recall is

inconsistent. Leaders have plans to address this so that the new curriculum can be in place for the beginning of the next school year.

Governors share leaders' ambitions to improve the school. They want the curriculum to prepare pupils well for the next stage of their learning. Governors explain in detail what leaders are doing to improve the curriculum so that pupils can easily recall important knowledge. Governors have begun to work with subject leaders to check that this is what is being developed. They have a plan in place to continue this work.

Leaders want pupils at their school to get off to the best possible start. They are improving the school environment, starting with the early years. They have prioritised work to develop what children learn in the early years so that it prepares them well for Year 1.

During the time of the pandemic, leaders have used an interim plan and self-evaluation to identify what they need to do next. They understand exactly what the school still needs to do to improve. They are putting in place a clear plan for the next school year, which identifies the actions that will take place and by when.

The impact of the pandemic has diverted some of the time which leaders have been able to commit to school improvement. They have been mindful of the additional workload that the provision of remote education has brought. Staff have worked hard to try and make sure that as many of the activities which would typically take place as part of school life have continued to do so, albeit in a different way. Leaders have managed staff workload well. Staff say although there has been much to learn, they have appreciated the training that they have received and feel well supported. They feel that these changes are making a difference and share leaders' vision for delivering the best quality learning for all the pupils of the school.

Additional support

Leaders have worked with a wide range of partners to bring about rapid change. Support from the local authority has helped leaders to evaluate the impact of their work and prioritise future improvements. Leaders have worked closely with advisers to improve their provision for children in the early years. Support from teaching schools has helped leaders to embed changes in mathematics and work out what needs to be further refined. External partners have worked with leaders to introduce a new approach to the teaching of phonics.

Further support is in place for leaders. This will develop expertise in staff who lead a subject or a phase of the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher and other senior leaders. I met with governors and spoke with a representative from the local authority to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I spoke with subject leaders, visited lessons and listened to some pupils read. I considered opinions expressed on Parent View and the staff survey. I scrutinised samples of work and documents that leaders provided.

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

Yours sincerely

Hazel Henson
Her Majesty's Inspector