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26 February 2010

Mrs Julia Ashton
Blackbrook St Mary's Catholic Primary School
Chain Lane
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Dear Mrs Ashton

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 25 February 2010; for the time you gave to our pre inspection preparation and the information you gave me then and during the monitoring visit itself. Please pass on my thanks to the deputy headteacher; the chair of governors; the parish priest; the local authority representative and the pupils I met with.

Prior to the inspection in March 2008, the school was placed into a local authority category of concern. Following the inspection, the headteacher retired and the substantive deputy headteacher took on the role of acting headteacher. In January 2009, a new headteacher was appointed externally and the deputy headteacher resigned. A new deputy headteacher was subsequently appointed. In March 2009 the local authority removed the school from its list of schools causing concern.

As a result of the inspection on March 2008, the school was asked to:

- raise expectations of pupils' achievement by providing them with more challenging targets
- improve the analysis of data in order to identify underachievement and to monitor subsequent progress
- base plans for school improvement firmly on the needs of pupils, identified through rigorous evaluation of the school's effectiveness.



Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and good progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

Pupils' attainment, as seen in the 2009 national test results for Key Stage 2, was broadly average. This is an improvement. The Key Stage 1 – 2 measures of progress were also broadly average, except in mathematics. This too is an improvement. However, national assessment results in Key Stage 1 show that, given the school's context, the standards reached by pupils in reading, writing and mathematics are inadequate. In addition, pupils in receipt of free school meals, in both key stages, perform less well than their peers nationally and their classmates. This picture of results is confirmed by lesson observations and the work in pupils' books. Crucially, the new senior leaders had already identified Key Stage 1 as an area of priority and have introduced a more rigorous programme of teaching phonic skills, reading recovery and professional development for teachers. In order to improve standards in mathematics, the previous arrangements for pupils to be taught in groups across the year groups have been abandoned and classes are now taught by their own class teachers. Consequently, teachers are able to monitor more closely the progress made by pupils in their own classes. Evidence from lesson observations and from pupils' books confirm that these changes are having a beneficial impact: the quality of teaching and learning in the mathematics lessons observed was good, allowing pupils to begin to catch up on their progress.

Since the appointment of the new headteacher and deputy headteacher, the school's response to the issues identified at the last inspection has been vigorous. The expectations of staff and pupils have been raised. There is a sharper focus on the progress made by pupils and the acquisition of core skills and key concepts. The school's leaders, and governors, know that the school should be aiming for higher standards overall. For example, in Year 2, the more-able pupils read well the simple texts from the commercial reading schemes, but their reading diet is limited. They do not read a sufficient volume of books over a week or term, nor more challenging books, for example, books across the full range of recommended genres. As a result too few pupils gain the higher levels in the national tests. The introduction of a robust system for tracking pupils' progress is enabling leaders to monitor more directly, and to discuss with teachers, how well pupils are doing. The additional support provided for pupils is therefore better directed and is having more effect. For example, the software programme used to help pupils' reading skills is paying dividends: one Year 6 girl who has previously only made below average progress saw her reading age improve by 6 months over 6 months, an increased rate of progress for her; in the same time period, another child, a Year 6 boy, increased his reading age by 12 months. There is still work to be done, however, to ensure that all the teaching in class lessons is sufficiently focused on moving pupils on in their learning as quickly as possible. In the satisfactory lessons observed, there was too much focus on enabling pupils to complete tasks, too much teacher talk and not enough application and independence by the pupils themselves.

The school improvement plan is divided into three main sections, the central one of which is 'Raising Standards'. This is a good, clear plan which meets the needs of the school because it focuses on the right priorities. The supporting documents, the 'Closing the Gap Action Plan' and the "Vulnerability Matrix" also set out clearly how the school intends to help those pupils who have fallen, or are in danger of falling, behind.

The impact of the local authority's support for the school is satisfactory.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Angela Westington
Her Majesty's Inspector