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Mr Andrew Darby
The Acting Headteacher
St Thomas More Catholic Primary School
Lewis Road
Cheltenham
Gloucestershire
GL51 0HZ

Dear Mr Darby

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Thomas More Catholic Primary School

Following my visit David King, Additional Inspector, to your school on 24 and 25 November 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in June 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection are set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of the governing body, the Directors of Children's Services for Gloucestershire and the Diocese of Clifton.

Yours sincerely

Michael Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2010

- Meet all requirements for ensuring children's safety with immediate effect by:
 - ensuring all necessary checks on staff are carried out and recorded
 - ensuring all required training in safeguarding is up to date
 - keeping complete records of the case histories of pupils at risk of harm
 - ensuring the governing body monitors procedures and practice more closely.

- Ensure the school's leaders have an accurate view of the school's provision and performance by:
 - tracking the progress of pupils accurately
 - analysing the information gained from such tracking in order to identify variations in the progress of the different groups
 - comparing the results of such analysis with other methods of evaluating teaching, to build a complete picture of its quality.
 - monitoring the impact of the recent changes to the curriculum.

- Use the results of the analyses above to draw up detailed plans for improvement that identify what area is in need of improvement, how it is to be improved, and what impact is expected on pupils' progress as a result.

- Improve the quality of teaching from satisfactory to at least good and raise achievement by:
 - ensuring more-able pupils are always given suitably challenging work
 - enabling lower-attaining pupils to work more effectively
 - ensuring swift action is taken by the school's leaders to rectify any inadequacies in provision.

Special measures: monitoring of St Thomas More Catholic Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 November 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and lessons in all years, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, the associate headteacher, the School Improvement Partner, the senior leadership team, subject leaders, the chair of the governing body, representatives from the local authority and groups of pupils.

Context

Since the time of the inspection, the headteacher has been away from school and it has been run by an acting headteacher, supported by an associate headteacher. There have been changes to the governing body, including the appointment of a new chair and vice chair. There have been a number of staffing changes and also changes to subject leadership. With the exception of a group of pupils who took the pilot mathematics tests, pupils did not take the end of Key Stage 2 tests in 2010.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Children generally enter the Reception class with skills and knowledge below those expected for their age and make good progress, although standards are still below average when they enter Year 1.

Assessments in 2010 at the end of Key Stage 1 indicate that standards are very low, with pupils making inadequate progress. In Key Stage 2 standards are low. The school has now ensured there is an accurate overview of standards in each year and has introduced a system to track the progress made by pupils. Early indications show that pupils are making better progress than at the time of the inspection and this is confirmed by observations of lessons and pupils' work.

Teachers have better information of the level at which pupils are working but this is not used consistently to ensure greater challenge in lessons. When pupils are supervised by either a teacher or teaching assistant progress is better than when they work independently. At times pupils become distracted and disengaged from their learning and they waste time waiting for teacher confirmation when they could be going on to the next phase of their work. Teachers do not bring the class together often enough to check how well they are learning and then set pupils off again on their tasks.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Many elements of pupils' personal development and well-being continue to be good, for example the extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles and feel safe. Pupils'

behaviour around the school is good, however too often they are compliant learners in class because they are not challenged enough in their thinking.

Attendance has improved since the time of the inspection but it still remains below average. Whilst pupils generally enjoy their learning, their attention and concentration sometimes waver when the pace of lessons is slow, especially when lessons lack engagement and excitement.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching is now more typically satisfactory. However, some of these lessons were only just satisfactory because they lack sufficient challenge. The curriculum, whilst it covers the essential elements, does not always enthuse and engage pupils. Opportunities to develop key skills across different subjects are not planned for sufficiently, for example extending writing skills during religious education lessons. Planning has improved so that now teachers plan for the different ability groups in their classes. Pupils find working independently difficult because they have previously had limited opportunities to develop their independent learning skills.

Teachers stick learning objectives into pupils' books prior to the start of the lesson. These are then discussed along with success criteria. However, these are often based upon task completion rather than clearly understood learning outcomes, or are focused on the acquisition of subject knowledge rather than skills. In lessons pupils assess themselves against the success criteria which they appreciate and respond to. Good relationships are a strong feature of most of the lessons seen, and teaching assistants provide appropriate support for pupils, especially those with special education needs and/or disabilities.

Teachers provide written praise and encouragement when marking pupils' books. At times they inform pupils how to improve their work, but this is not consistent and pupils commented that they sometimes do not know what is expected. Comments are sometimes too complex for pupils to understand. Pupils do not then have opportunities to reflect upon the comments and return and update the marked work or to enter into a learning dialogue.

For children in the Early Years Foundation Stage staff continue to provide a safe and secure environment. Children continue to enjoy their learning and their attitudes are consistently good. For example, children were observed working well in making puppets. All areas of the curriculum are suitably covered, with adult-led activities and opportunities for the children to choose for themselves, including working both inside and outside.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the area for improvement:

- improve the quality of teaching and raise achievement – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The acting headteacher has quickly gained a good overview of how to bring about the necessary improvements. The new governing body has a clear understanding of the main strengths and weaknesses of the school and now has the ability to hold staff to account and to challenge as well as support. Governors are currently working with the local authority to formalise an agreement to manage the deficit budget over a three-year period.

Staff feel empowered and leaders across all levels feel they have an important part to play in the decision-making process of the school. They are far more aware of their roles and responsibilities and also what is expected of them. They are starting to take greater responsibility in monitoring the work in their areas of responsibility but, for some, who are very new to post, they have not yet undertaken lesson observations. Plans to improve specific areas have been written, but for some the success criteria lack rigour and are not linked to pupils' outcomes. The school is updating its performance management procedures because many staff have not been appraised on their leadership roles and have not been aware of how they could improve their practice. There is, however, considerable uncertainty and concern about how the strategic direction of the school will continue.

Safeguarding procedures have been updated so that they now meet expected standards. Staff have all received appropriate training and there are comprehensive records for pupils who are at risk of harm. The school has an accurate baseline of pupils' levels across all years and has set challenging targets for individuals. The progress towards these targets is evaluated six times a year.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- meet all requirements for ensuring children's safety – good
- ensuring the school's leaders have an accurate view of the school's provision and performance – satisfactory
- use the results of the school's self-evaluation to draw up detailed plans for improvement – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority's statement of action is good. It provides a sound framework for further improvement, including suitable support for the leadership of the school, subject expertise and for governors. It now needs updating to take into account the priorities for further improvement identified within this report. The School Improvement Partner and associate headteacher work directly with the acting headteacher to develop the capacity of the senior leadership team. Governors have received effective support to ensure that they have a good understanding of the key components of governance and that the school meets the current safeguarding requirements. The local authority coordinates support well and evaluates its impact to ensure actions bring about the necessary improvements.

The work of acting headteacher has been very effective in supporting the school, identifying weaknesses in teaching and leadership and providing appropriate support by mentoring individual staff including collaboration with staff at his own school.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards and increase the rate of progress for all pupils but especially those in Key Stage 1. by:
 - ensuring all pupils are challenged in lessons
 - ensuring pupils who are working independently in lessons make similar progress to those who are under direct adult supervision.

- Improve attendance rates to average by:
 - supporting parents whose children have significant time off school
 - ensuring the curriculum offers more exciting and engaging lessons.

- Ensure that the strategic direction of the school continues to improve by:
 - allowing staff to use their expertise and experience to make a greater contribution to decision making and identifying how to build upon success to date
 - implementing a rigorous system of performance management so that staff are appraised on their classroom practice and leadership and management skills.