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Ms P Smart
Executive Headteacher
Abbey Infant School
Maurice Road
Smethwick
B67 5LR

Dear Ms Smart

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Abbey Infant School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 2 October 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the pupils, staff, local authority representative and the Chair of the Governing Body, with whom I met during the day.

Since the last inspection, the deputy headteacher has left the school and a new deputy headteacher has been appointed. A new Chair of the Governing Body has been elected.

As a result of the inspection on 11 January 2012, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

Pupils' attainment is rising. 2012 assessment data indicate that children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Year 1 are making better progress from their starting points. The proportion of pupils achieving the higher Level 3 at the end of Key Stage 1 has risen since 2011 by 15% in reading, 18% in writing, and by 21% in mathematics. Pupils are making better progress due to improvements in the quality of teaching, driven and underpinned by some significant improvements made to the quality of leadership and management. Pupils supported through the pupil premium, disabled pupils, those who have special educational needs, and those who speak English as an additional language, are making improved progress and closing the gaps between themselves and other pupils. This is because their progress is tracked more carefully, and activities and interventions better meet their needs.

Pupils are making more rapid progress in developing reading skills. This is due, in part, to the school's implementation of a more structured programme of daily phonics (the sounds that letters make), with sessions more accurately matched to pupils' needs and abilities. During the inspection, children in one of the Reception classes were observed taking part in a phonics lesson led by a teaching assistant. Children made good progress in their learning during the lesson and responded well to the range of activities. These included a 'pass the hat' activity, where children enjoyed picking out words from a hat and reading them to the rest of the group. Older pupils read to the inspector from their reading books and demonstrated good phonic decoding strategies, understanding of text and enjoyment of reading.

The quality of teaching is improving. Assessment systems, including systems to track the progress of different groups of pupils across the school have been tightened and effectively inform teachers' planning and the pattern of leaders' monitoring activities. A new planning format has been adopted by staff and this has successfully generated greater consistency in the quality of planning across the school. Teachers and teaching assistants question pupils well in order to extend their thinking. However, on some occasions, they do not check pupils' progress in lessons frequently enough in order to swiftly identify and address misconceptions.

As a result of changes made by school leaders, teaching assistants are more effectively deployed and play an important role in improving pupils' achievement. They deliver group teaching activities more frequently, including phonics sessions. They also communicate well with class teachers to ensure that assessment information is shared well and that lessons are effectively planned. This results in work that is matched accurately to pupils' needs and presents a good level of challenge. Teaching assistants report that they now feel highly valued, better trained and supported and find work far more rewarding than they did previously.

The executive headteacher and the new deputy headteacher, who has settled very quickly into her new role, have successfully communicated a clear vision for the school. All staff spoken to during the inspection report that there are now higher expectations and increased systems of accountability in the school, underpinned by robust performance management mechanisms. Consequently, staff morale is high and there is a determination to continue to improve. Other initiatives have developed a strong sense of professionalism among staff. These include staff-led 'action research' projects, in which members of staff research a range of hypotheses linked to teaching and learning. Consequently, they identify 'advice for colleagues' and the 'next steps they need to take' to continue to improve provision. For example, one project explored the importance of using real-life contexts when pupils solve problems in mathematics.

Leaders play an increasingly active role in monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. They engage in frequent lesson observations, learning walks, scrutiny of assessment data and a range of other relevant activities. Feedback to staff provides clear guidance about strengths and areas for development and improvement. As a result, the quality of teaching is improving. Newly introduced 'Leadership Logs'

support the effective recording of leaders' work and enable them to share information efficiently with other leaders, and to monitor the impact of actions over time.

The Chair of the Governing body has an accurate overview of the school's current position. The governing body, including a newly implemented 'focus group', provides a good balance of challenge and support to school leaders. Governors are becoming increasingly involved in first-hand monitoring of the school's work. However, their monitoring activities are not always referred to explicitly in action plans, meaning that not all key school priorities are monitored as closely as they could be.

The curriculum has been revised and pupils are now given more frequent opportunities to take part in practical tasks, particularly those moving from the Early Years Foundation Stage into Key Stage 1. The school grounds and indoor learning environments have been improved to provide increased opportunities for a more diverse range of teaching activities and an increased focus on learning. The curriculum has been further enhanced by an improved range of school trips and visitors to the school. As a result, pupils report that they enjoy coming to school. Although attendance is still below average, there is a strong trend of improvement over time.

The local authority statement of action was moderated by Her Majesty's Inspectors prior to this visit, and met requirements. The local authority has provided the school with good support since the last inspection. Support has been particularly effective in developing the role of middle leaders and in brokering partnerships with schools in the local area recognised for their outstanding practice.

The central record of suitability checks on staff was scrutinised during the inspection and it fully meets government requirements.

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

Yours sincerely

Jeremy Spencer
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2012

- Improve the effectiveness of leaders and managers by ensuring that:
 - school improvement planning focuses more precisely on key areas, and strategies are rigorously implemented, monitored and evaluated to determine the impact on pupils' learning
 - the governing body focuses its challenge more incisively on the school's priorities for improvement
 - the roles of middle leaders are developed so they make a significant impact on school improvement.

- Raise the quality of teaching and learning in reading, writing and mathematics so that pupils make good progress, by ensuring that:
 - information gained from assessments is used to plan work that consistently meets pupils' learning needs
 - teaching assistants are always well deployed and make an effective contribution to pupils' learning
 - teachers check pupils' progress during lessons and make necessary adjustments to meet their needs
 - teachers use targeted questions effectively to check pupils' understanding and provide greater challenge
 - pupils are more actively involved in lessons, including through practical tasks, discussions and opportunities to use their initiative
 - teachers are provided with clear guidance about their strengths and areas for development and improvements needed are addressed tenaciously in further monitoring.

- Accelerate pupils' progress in reading by ensuring that all staff who teach phonics are fully trained and confident.