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Paul Madsen
Thomas Bullock Primary School
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Thetford
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Dear Mr Madsen

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Thomas Bullock Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 29–30 January 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in February 2013. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Norfolk.

Yours sincerely

David Rzeznik
Additional Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better by ensuring that:
 - teachers have enough opportunity to learn from the strongest aspects of good teaching in their own and other schools
 - teachers make more effective use of time in all lessons to enable pupils to learn quickly.

- Raise attainment so that standards are at least in line with the national average in English and mathematics by July 2014 by:
 - giving pupils precise information on the level at which they are working and how they can improve their work
 - identifying the reasons for the gaps in attainment between boys and girls in writing and mathematics and taking action to boost boys' and girls' mathematical skills
 - ensuring that there are sufficient trained staff to teach the programmes planned for pupils eligible for support from pupil premium funding, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, and other pupils who need to catch up.

- Improve leadership and management by ensuring that:
 - teaching is checked more rigorously and that scrutiny of teaching concentrates more on the impact it is having on pupils' progress
 - governors receive suitable training to enable them to become fully effective in holding senior leaders to account and contributing more to school improvement.

- An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 29–30 February 2014

Evidence

The inspection concentrated on evaluating the extent of improvement in addressing the areas for improvement identified by inspectors in February 2013.

The inspector met with the headteacher, Chair of the Governing Body, subject leaders for English and mathematics, school improvement officer and the person responsible for maintaining the single central record of recruitment checks on staff.

The inspector observed nine lessons, including the teaching of an intervention group by a teaching assistant. Teaching was seen in all classes, mainly in English and mathematics. Detailed feedback was given to all teachers, and teaching assistants observed, so that they knew where the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning lie. A sample of writing and mathematics work from Years 2, 3, 4 and 6 was evaluated, to check if marking was identifying what must be improved. The scrutiny of work was undertaken with the headteacher. A range of documentation was evaluated, including the school's attainment and progress information, governing body meeting minutes, monitoring and evaluation records and a report of an audit undertaken by school improvement officers in July 2013. The school improvement plan was looked at again because it was not fit for purpose in May 2013.

Context

The Department for Education has agreed that the school will convert to an academy. The date of conversion has not been formally agreed. The sponsor is the Norwich Diocesan Academy Trust.

Two new teachers were appointed at the start of the autumn term 2013, to teach classes in Years 3 and 5. The Year 5 teacher is newly qualified. The Year 3 teacher is experienced. A teaching assistant left in July 2013. Four new teaching assistants were employed in September 2013. The school has increased the number of teaching assistants this academic year. An existing member of staff became the subject leader for mathematics in May 2013. The Vice-Chair of Governors became the Chair of the Governing Body in September 2013. Three new governors have been appointed since May 2013.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

The headteacher, subject leaders for English and mathematics and governors have all improved their effectiveness. The school is moving in the right direction and the pace of improvement has quickened since September 2013. There is no air of complacency and expectations are suitably high. This said, the improvement journey has not been easy, and at times senior leaders have lacked self-confidence in the work that they are doing. On occasions, leaders have followed external advice,

against their better judgement, which has led to work being done that they do not fully believe in. Senior leaders have recognised this and they are now engaging in activities that fit more closely with the school's ethos and vision, resulting in improvements in teaching and learning.

In May 2013, the school improvement plan was not fit for purpose because the proposed actions were not always relevant, clear or specific, and some of the work being done was not of high priority. Those responsible for leading actions were not always specified in the plan and the outcomes to be achieved were not sufficiently explicit. Weaknesses have been rectified effectively, and the current school improvement plan is fit for purpose. It is now well-focused and senior leaders and governors are concentrating their efforts on rectifying the most serious weaknesses. Priorities, actions and the targets to be achieved are clear.

Subject leaders for English and mathematics are appropriately monitoring teaching and learning, and know what is working well and what must be improved. Weaknesses in teaching and learning are identified, and suitable action is being taken to remedy shortcomings in teaching practice. For example, monitoring by the mathematics leader uncovered that pupils' mental mathematical skills are weak, so changes have been made to the way pupils are taught. Pupils in all years are now grouped by their mathematical ability, and they get regular, intensive teaching to improve their mental calculation skills. The early signs are that pupils' mental agility is improving, but there is a way to go before it is good. Good practice drawn from local schools, and from within the school, is being shared effectively. For example, some effective teaching and curriculum methods used in other schools have been adopted in all phases to improve teaching and assessment methods to accelerate pupils' progress. There are now sufficient trained staff to teach those pupils eligible for support from pupil premium funding, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, and other pupils who need to catch up. The tracking of pupils' attainment and progress is much better, but it is still not comprehensive enough. External partners have undertaken checks of teachers' ability to make secure judgements about the standards achieved and the accuracy of their judgements about the quality of teaching and learning. However, there is no written verification of the outcome of the checks undertaken to confirm that they are fair, accurate and valid.

An external review of governance was carried out in May 2013 by a representative of the National College for School Leadership. The outcome is that governors are now fully aware of their roles and responsibilities because of the training that they have received. They have a more strategic approach to school development than in the past. They are more robust in holding senior leaders and subject leaders to account for school outcomes. For example, they are keeping a close eye on the progress made by different groups of pupils, particularly those eligible for free school meals and disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, and are rightly asking why some individuals are not making sufficient progress in some subjects. The school improvement board, which is chaired by the school improvement officer,

and includes the headteacher and governors, meets monthly to evaluate what is working well and what must be improved. Minutes of meetings are produced, but they are overly descriptive. No overarching judgements are made to indicate whether progress on key priorities is inadequate, adequate, good or outstanding. Consequently, there is a lack of clarity as to the extent of progress made so far in rectifying the serious weaknesses identified in February 2013.

In May 2013, the single central record did not always specify the date and person undertaking the required checks. Weaknesses have now been rectified. The single central record contains all of the required information.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Teaching and learning are improving in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils' progress in these subjects is accelerating, particularly since September 2013. Inadequate teaching has been eradicated, and there is more good teaching than in February 2013. Pupils are making better progress because they are taught more effectively.
- Good teaching and learning in Reception have been maintained. Children are making good progress, particularly in their literacy, mathematical, personal and social development. In 2013, attainment at the end of the Reception was above the national average.
- The targets set for pupils in Years 1 and 2 are ambitious.
- Teachers create a positive climate for learning, and pupils engage with activities well.
- Pupils were well behaved in the lessons observed. Relationships between teachers and pupils and between the pupils themselves are very good. Pupils are keen to succeed and work diligently on the tasks set.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Teachers do not always clearly identify what pupils can and cannot do before planning work. There is too much consolidation of learning rather than teaching pupils things that they do not know, so that learning is extended. Assessment information is not always used effectively to ensure activities are properly matched to pupils' capabilities when it is appropriate to do so. There are times when teacher expectations are not high enough and work lacks challenge.
- Lesson planning does not make sufficiently explicit the sequence of learning to be followed, or show how activities will link together to ensure learning is

coherent and lesson objectives are met. The level of the work, and the targets set for different groups of pupils are often unclear in planning.

- Not enough good teaching was observed during the inspection. Pupils are not making consistently good progress in reading, writing and mathematics in Years 1 to 6. The progress made by some free school meals pupils, and some disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, is not fast enough. For example, the writing progress made by those who have special educational needs in Year 1, between September and December 2013, was too slow. Free school meals pupils, currently in Year 5, are not making up for lost ground in writing rapidly enough.
- The tracking of pupils' progress, from their different starting points, to determine their progress in reading, writing and mathematics each academic year and over time, is not sharp enough.
- The targets set for pupils in Years 3 to 6 are not high enough. Marking of work is inconsistent. What must be improved is not always clearly identified.
- Pupils are not speaking to the teacher, and each other, often enough to clarify their thinking and to develop their ideas. Teachers too readily accept short utterances in answer to their questions. Teachers are not encouraging pupils to use complex sentences and a rich vocabulary when talking to develop their speaking skills and confidence when speaking aloud. Teachers are not teaching, or modelling the grammatical structures of English often enough during lessons.
- The presentation of work in books is variable. Spelling and punctuation errors are not being systematically rectified. The spelling policy is not being properly implemented. Too many pupils in Years 5 and 6 are not writing in a fluent joined-up style.
- Pupils are not writing at length. Work scrutiny reveals that pupils in Years 3 to 6 are not writing in a wide range of different styles. Some teachers are overusing worksheets and this limits what pupils can produce.
- The teaching of letters and sounds (phonics) does not focus enough on the meaning of words. Some of the words that are introduced to pupils are not relevant or within their level of experience. Pupils are not encouraged to write their own sentences, using the words introduced, during phonic teaching.

External support

The local authority statement of action has been suitably implemented. The external review of governance and the appointment of additional governors has improved governors' effectiveness. The specialist adviser for mathematics has undertaken an audit of teachers' subject knowledge so that gaps in mathematical knowledge,

particularly calculation are identified and addressed through targeted training. Local authority support to help the school track pupils' attainment and progress has been beneficial; however, data analysis is still not comprehensive enough.

The school has worked with leaders in good schools, and good practice from elsewhere has been adopted to improve teaching and the leadership skills of subject leaders. Local authority school improvement officers undertook an audit of the school in July 2013. Strengths and areas for development were identified in a written report. Some of the weaknesses identified in the report were vague and the wording in some sections of the report lacked precision. Lack of clarity makes it difficult to assess the extent of improvement in remedying failings in some areas.

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection the local authority has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the school improvement plan is fit for purpose.