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Miss Tracey Chappell
Headteacher
Seghill First School
Seghill
Cramlington
Northumberland
NE23 7SB

Dear Miss Chappell

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Seghill First School, Northumberland

Following my visit to your school on 4 March 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the school since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in October 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. The school should take immediate action to:

- adapt the school action plan so that it clearly identifies, especially for governors, the difference actions are intended to have on the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement as the year progresses
- evaluate whether new initiatives and staff training are making a discernible enough difference to pupils' progress
- ensure that greater focus is given to the progress pupils are making over time when evaluating the quality and impact of teaching
- work with the local authority to moderate the assessment of pupils' work, especially of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, to gain a more accurate and reliable benchmark of the progress being made.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, three members of the governing body, the National Leader of Education providing support to the school and a representative of the local authority, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I undertook a brief tour of the school and evaluated a range of documentation including the school action plan, pupil progress information, recent records of lesson observation and the minutes of the steering group.

Context

In the last week, two parent governors have resigned. This means that there are currently four vacancies on the governing body.

Main findings

Despite the initial disappointment with the outcome of the recent inspection, you have worked quickly to implement a range of actions to improve the quality of teaching across the school. However, inherent weaknesses in the approaches being used to monitor and evaluate the impact of actions to improve the school's effectiveness diminish the ability of senior leaders and governors to know exactly where they are in their ambition to become good or better at the time of the next inspection.

Your intention that pupils make greater progress in their learning is shared by everyone connected with the school and there is clear commitment from staff and governors to make the necessary changes in practice. This is why the extensive training package that has already been delivered through the Tyne Valley Teaching Alliance has been so well received. However, as stated above, the approaches being used to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of your work lack the precision and depth of analysis needed to judge if improvement is effective and happening at a quick enough rate. Given that nearly five months have already elapsed, it is essential that these mechanisms are urgently reviewed so that the school knows precisely how far they still have to go over the next 12-18 months.

The school's action plan and approach to lesson observation are not as helpful as they could be as tools for more rapid school improvement. Lesson observations provide a 'snapshot' of teaching on a given day but do not take account of pupils' progress over time. This can provide too rosy a view of exactly how far teaching still has to go for pupil progress to become good or better. While the action plan includes all relevant areas and clear lines of accountability, it does not include specific, measurable targets that are linked to improvements to the quality of teaching or the progress pupils are expected to make. This makes it difficult, especially for governors, to know if the actions you have implemented are making a discernible enough difference to pupils' learning as the year progresses.

Nevertheless, there have been some 'quick wins' in changing practice across the school. For example, there is now a consistent approach to handwriting so that pupils' work is becoming neater. However, this only scratches the surface of what needs to be done and there are more significant elements of teaching that need to be addressed if pupils' progress is to hasten. In particular, the local authority should ensure that the assessments made of pupils' work are moderated so that there is an accurate and reliable baseline from which staff can plan to meet the appropriate next steps of their class. This should begin in the Early Years Foundation Stage where you have rightly identified inconsistency in judgements.

Governors have commissioned the external review of their work quickly and are keen to develop their own practice in order to support more rapid improvement. However, because the action plan does not include targets in relation to pupils' progress over time, governors are not able to judge for themselves what current progress information is telling them about the rate of school improvement. While they want to challenge you more robustly, they are not receiving the correct level of detail about the school's work to enable them to do so with any great rigour.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The reports of the steering group have not been helpful in identifying the ineffective systems and documentation currently being used to assess the impact of the school's work since the section 5 inspection. This missed opportunity to sharpen crucial systems of monitoring and evaluation of school improvement initiatives has slowed the rate of improvement.

The local authority has commissioned extensive support from a National Leader of Education (NLE) through the Tyne Valley Teaching Alliance. This has resulted in swift and wide-ranging support for both leaders and teachers, including the observation of best practice at the NLE's Support School. Greater emphasis now needs to be placed on identifying the precise impact of this work through a more forensic analysis of the improvements to teaching and its impact on pupils' progress over time.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

Her Majesty's Inspector