

Tribal
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 0117 311 5359
Direct F 0117 315 0430
Email: christina.bannerman@tribalgroup.com

4 April 2014

Mrs Elisabeth Blanden
The Acting Headteacher
St Francis' Catholic Primary School
Queen's Road
Maidstone
Kent
ME16 0LB

Dear Mrs Blanden

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Francis' Catholic Primary School, Maidstone

Following my visit on 2 and 3 April 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. 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 third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2013. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. 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 special measures.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published 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 Director of Children's Services for Kent and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Southwark.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve teaching so that it is good, by ensuring teachers:
 - actively engage pupils' interest in lessons and move learning on at a brisk pace
 - provide work that matches pupils' abilities
 - provide good opportunities for pupils to work independently
 - question pupils effectively so that they are challenged to think and deepen their knowledge.

- Accelerate pupils' progress in writing and mathematics by:
 - providing appropriately challenging tasks for pupils who need extra help to extend their literacy and numeracy skills
 - ensuring that pupils clearly understand what they should be focusing on in their learning
 - giving pupils effective guidance and feedback about how to improve their work
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to apply their knowledge by responding to teachers' feedback.

- Improve leadership and management at all levels by:
 - making sure leaders' judgements about pupils' progress are accurate, and that they take action where data show progress is less than good
 - checking on teaching rigorously, especially in writing and mathematics, and telling teachers clearly what they need to do to improve their practice
 - providing staff with the information and effective training they need to identify how to improve pupils' progress
 - ensuring governors ask challenging questions about the information they are given and so hold leaders to account for pupils' progress.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 2 and 3 April 2014

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher. Teaching was observed in 12 lessons, including two observations jointly conducted with the acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher. Shorter visits to lessons were also made. Meetings were held with governors, a representative from the local authority and a representative from the prospective academy sponsor. The inspector had discussions with teachers and middle leaders. The inspector spoke to pupils in lessons and met with a group of selected Year 5 and Year 6 pupils. The inspector also had a telephone conversation with the Director of School Improvement for Kent County Council.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, one member of staff has left the school. The coordinator for special educational needs has been released from her teaching commitment. The substantive headteacher remains absent, as was the case at the previous two monitoring visits.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils' achievement is continuing to show improvement overall, but the general positive picture disguises some groups whose progress has slowed down since the previous monitoring inspection. There are still too many discrepancies in pupils' progress within classes and year groups. School leaders have rightly identified that pupils in Year 2 are making slower progress. Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are also not making enough progress. According to the school's current information, those pupils eligible for additional government funding through the pupil premium make similar progress to other pupils. However, there are still individual pupils who are not catching up quickly with other pupils, particularly in writing.

More consistent progress can be seen in the Reception year in which pupils speak confidently and fluently, are increasingly adept at number work and are forming their letters neatly, in cursive style and in full sentences.

The headteacher has a secure grasp of how well pupils are doing and has developed a method of tracking pupils' progress that enables her to investigate and analyse achievement at a finely tuned level. However, other leaders are not so skilled and do not take enough responsibility for evaluating pupils' progress in their specific areas.

The quality of teaching

The small proportion of inadequate teaching has now been eradicated and there is a better proportion of teaching that is securely good. In every classroom, teachers are

working with increased conviction and sense of responsibility. Teachers are taking more account of pupils' different abilities when planning lessons and creating resources. Pupils are also working more productively and with greater confidence and pride. For example, in a Year 5 class, the teacher patiently demonstrated opening sentences for a piece of extended writing about the Crucifixion. The pupils gave the teacher's demonstration their full attention and then moved quickly on to their own writing. No time was wasted in starting; pupils devoted their full concentration to making sure that they made the right choice of words to convey the appropriate mood. All pupils made good progress, writing accurately and sensitively, while the teacher quietly checked and supported them.

Teachers in the Reception classes are planning more effectively to ensure that children make good progress in a stimulating and orderly environment. During the monitoring inspection they took advantage of an exciting visit from the local fire service to reinforce children's understanding of numbers and develop their communication skills. Adults responded skilfully to the children, asking carefully-phrased questions and encouraging them to give extended answers. As a result, children were able to thrive in a range of lively outdoor activities, adding to their vocabulary and understanding of key concepts.

Better questioning is opening up thoughtful explorations of topics for most classes. Some teachers respond well to pupils' answers and use them to move learning on and extend understanding. For example, during a mathematics lesson the teacher used investigative questions to check pupils' understanding of equivalent fractions. Pupils of all levels of ability were challenged and made progress as a result of the teacher's intensive inquiry. However, not all pupils are provided with enough guidance about giving extended answers to teachers' questions. There are missed opportunities for pupils to explain their answers, rehearse complete sentences to help with their writing or develop better vocabulary.

Pupils told the inspector that teachers 'don't make the answer obvious' and that work is more challenging. In the more effective teaching, lower ability pupils are challenged as much as the most able. However, this is not consistent enough across the school. Although teachers are more mindful of setting work at the correct level for the pupils in their classes, they do not have enough guidance about how to ensure that disabled pupils and those with special educational needs make rapid progress. Planning for these pupils is sometimes 'hit or miss', with work that is too easy. In addition, some more-able pupils told the inspector that they sometimes had to wait for the teacher when they had finished work and did not have enough to be getting on with.

Although classrooms are packed with resources, displays and objects, some are disorganised and uninviting. Some classroom layouts and storage spaces make it difficult for pupils to make prompt changes from one activity to another.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils continue to behave well in and out of the classroom. Pupils are enthusiastic and usually eager to learn and participate. Most are diligent and keen to achieve their targets and please their teachers. During the monitoring inspection, pupils concentrated studiously, kept their work neat and tidy and thought carefully about the teacher's guidance. Minor bickering among younger pupils is usually dealt with well, although some challenging behaviour is not followed up with positive models of how to share, be attentive and get along well together.

Pupils attend well and are punctual. Pupils are safe in the school and school leaders have ensured that all statutory safeguarding arrangements are met.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The acting headteacher, ably supported by the executive headteacher and the acting deputy headteacher, has succeeded in transforming attitudes and expectations of staff. This has been brought about by their astute focus on pupils' progress rather than teaching style, determined but sensitive monitoring of teachers' work, followed up directly with setting tough performance management targets and deadlines. Most staff have risen to the challenge and welcomed the increased pressure to improve because they now have clear direction, guidance and support.

The senior leaders' positive drive for change has inculcated a strong sense of teamwork among the staff, which previously had been suppressed. Teachers now work together, share planning and coach each other. The selection of 'teaching champions' has endorsed teachers' existing skills and enabled teachers to lead and take more responsibility.

However, the concerns identified at the last monitoring inspection regarding the progress of those pupils with special educational needs have not been dispelled and planning to improve their achievement has lacked coherence. There has been limited practical support for teachers' day-to-day work, which has slowed rates of progress. Not enough consideration is given to those pupils who join the school at times other than the beginning of the academic year. Some new pupils do not get off to a flying start because the systems for checking their ability and planning for their particular needs are not well organised.

The governing body has been strengthened further since the last monitoring inspection. Newly-appointed governors have brought expertise, increased ambition and professionalism. Following valuable training in understanding school performance data, governors have seized upon information about pupils' progress, asking probing and precise questions, and insisting on equally precise answers from school leaders.

As at the previous two monitoring inspections, the substantive headteacher has been absent from the school. The uncertainty around the leadership of the school has not stood in the way of improvement and staff are settled and secure under the current

arrangements. However, the time taken to resolve the question of the long-term leadership of the school is holding up strategic plans for the future, including becoming a sponsored academy. This delay is not helpful to the school and is impeding rates of progress.

External support

The school has benefited from support from a local authority adviser and a teaching and learning consultant. Both have accurately identified what needs to improve in the school and can point to the impact of the support, training and coaching programme. The local authority adviser provides guidance and performs a monitoring role for school leaders. Under the guidance of the acting headteacher, the teaching and learning consultant has worked closely with teachers in a very practical way. All those supporting the school convey a consistent message and staff no longer feel confused or demoralised about the plethora of different advice about their work. The school would further benefit from a link with a good or outstanding school in order to observe good progress for pupils with special educational needs and leadership at all levels.