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Mr Julian Rogers
Headteacher
St Matthew's Church of England Primary School
Withers Street
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Lancashire
BB1 1DF

Dear Mr Rogers

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Matthew's Church of England Primary School, Blackburn with Darwen

Following my visit to your school on 1 May 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 January 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- improve pupils' confidence in mental mathematics
- give pupils more opportunities for extended writing with real purposes
- offer older pupils higher level fiction to read
- get external support to speed progress on the action plan, particularly on the impact of governance.

Evidence

During the visit, I met you, the deputy headteacher and governors to discuss the action taken since the last inspection and the effects of action. I spoke with a representative of the local authority. I evaluated the school's post-inspection action plan and data on school performance. Jointly with you and the deputy headteacher, I visited four classrooms on a learning walk, carried out a work scrutiny of books of

24 pupils and heard 12 boys and girls reading. Other school evidence was considered including your own evaluation of progress on the action plan.

Main findings

On our learning walk, there was a productive working atmosphere in all classes. Children we talked to could reply in complete sentences and use Standard English. Older pupils also gave reasons and explanations. All classes were working methodically on mathematics – fractions, percentages, addition and subtraction - in groups with the support of at least one other adult as well as the teacher.

Pupils said that they enjoyed working with numbers but they lacked confidence in mental mathematics, or 'doing things in my head' as one pupil said. Some methods and resources were too laborious. This limited progress of those children who could do the calculations more swiftly. To make more progress on the action plan in raising standards at Key Stage 1, it is important to give more opportunities to use mathematical skills to solve real life, higher level problems.

Hearing children read was a positive experience. All of the children we heard reading said that they read at home for at least twenty minutes every day. Across the range of abilities, both boys and girls read with accuracy, using phonic cues to work out unfamiliar words. Older pupils read with expression and enjoyment. They could explain why a story was funny or exciting using evidence from the text. Some pupils could decode new words but not understand what they meant. You and the Inclusion Co-ordinator have put in place a project to extend vocabulary which is only just starting to bear fruit. A further step to raise achievement of able pupils is to provide more demanding books that they could read at more length for enjoyment.

Our large sample of pupils' work showed both strengths and areas for improvement, related to the action plan. Marking has improved and there were examples of pupils acting on teachers' feedback, such as an older pupil writing an interesting 'prequel' to a story, and a younger one remembering to use her ruler for underlining. Over a term's work, we could see examples of progress in pupils' handwriting, sentence structure, grammar and vocabulary, and in using different writing styles.

However, in some classes there is simply not enough writing at length to enable pupils to reach higher levels, as stated in the action plan. Boys write less than girls. Too much work in literacy books and in topic books relies on short answers on worksheets which are cut and pasted into books.

The school action plan is an effective working document. It focuses on improving teaching and learning, without getting too side-tracked. Thought has gone into planning the right steps, such as training to enhance in observation skills as well as putting a programme of observation in place. The range of evidence used includes pupils' work over time and regular learning walks. Actions have clear timescales,

responsibilities and links with performance management. Data is used in the form of tables with term-by-term pupil assessments and targets for Years 2 to 6.

The impact of the plan can be seen most readily in three areas: improvements to teachers' marking and feedback; better behaviour in one class; some improvements to teaching, using a bespoke approach for individual teachers. The external review of governance has been completed and the review of use of the pupil premium is mid-way. However, there is already some slippage on the action plan. There is not as much higher level achievement coming through in Key Stage 1 as hoped.

Since the inspection, governors have not made substantial changes to how they visit school to check progress, though they are putting in place groundwork for improvement by streamlining membership and reviewing committee structures. Governors are also taking part in training about school data. In practice, however, the impact of these changes is not yet evident.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection. With regard to improving governance, HMI will contact the school further as soon as possible.

External support

Support from the local authority has been useful but limited. Since the inspection, the school improvement officer has supported the headteacher in writing the action plan and in finding people to lead external reviews. There are intentions for local authority visits to moderate teachers' assessment in Key Stage 1 and to provide training for governors but this had not happened yet.

The school finds itself in a gap between changing systems for external support and challenge. The local authority has had to reduce the size of the school improvement service. Schools have begun to form training clusters but this is at an early stage, so you and the deputy headteacher are driving improvement largely on your own.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Blackburn with Darwen.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Comiskey

Her Majesty's Inspector