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9 May 2014

Mrs M Ravey
Acting Headteacher
St Finbar's Catholic Primary School
South Hill Road
Liverpool
Merseyside
L8 9RY

Dear Mrs Ravey

Special measures monitoring inspection of St Finbar's Catholic Primary School

Following my visit, to your school on 7 and 8 May 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 February 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 and the Director for Children and Young Peoples Services for Liverpool.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow

Her Majesty's 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 at least consistently good by:
 - ensuring that teachers use information about how well pupils are doing to plan work which meets the needs of all learners
 - ensuring that teachers' marking and feedback always give clear guidance to pupils about what they need to do to improve their work
 - ensuring teachers have high expectations about the standard and amount of work that pupils should produce, and by making sure that there is a good level of challenge for the more able pupils
 - sharing good practice in teaching, and providing targeted support for teachers to improve their practice.

- Ensure that pupils make at least good progress in English and mathematics, especially between Years 3 and 6, so that their attainment rises by:
 - checking the progress of individuals and groups of pupils regularly and robustly, so that leaders and teachers can take swift action to address any underachievement
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to practise their skills and solve problems in mathematics
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to write for a range of different purposes, and to produce longer pieces of writing in English and other subjects.

- Improve attendance, particularly of those pupils who do not attend regularly enough, by:
 - consolidating the recently introduced strategies, and ensuring that all pupils and parents have a clear understanding of the importance of coming to school.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels, including governance, in driving rapid improvements by:
 - ensuring, as a matter of urgency, that the school has well-qualified, experienced and permanent staff at senior leadership level and that their roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
 - ensuring that the school's improvement plans contain actions and ways of measuring success that are closely linked to improvements in pupils' achievement
 - using systems for monitoring teachers' performance to set all teachers clear targets and expected outcomes
 - ensuring that governors have the information they need to be able to hold school leaders to account for the school's performance.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 7 to 8 May 2014.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, members of the senior leadership team and a small group of governors, including the Chair of the Governing Body. In addition, discussions were held with groups of pupils, parents and representatives from the diocese as well as the local authority. Subject leaders for English and the Early Years Foundation Stage were also interviewed. Lessons were observed across every key stage, including the Early Years Foundation Stage. Learning walks, accompanied by a senior leader, were used to observe phonics (the teaching of letters and the sounds they make) and guided reading sessions. The majority of the lesson observations were joint observations with members of the senior leadership team. A selection of books was scrutinised to determine how well pupils were learning over time and how they were developing their literacy skills in the context of other subjects.

Context

Although staffing turbulence continues to be an impediment, this is much reduced from the previous autumn term. There has been a much greater degree of stability across the school with no classes experiencing frequent changes of teacher. A number of staffing issues have been resolved but this has resulted in the Early Years Foundation Stage unit being devoid of substantive staff. An experienced teacher has been seconded until the end of this academic year to teach in and manage this area of the school. One permanent appointment has been made to one of the vacant class-teacher positions and another permanent teacher is due to fill another post from September. Unfortunately, the headteacher has been absent since the start of the year due to ill health and this has necessitated some temporary restructuring of senior management. The seconded deputy headteacher has taken temporary charge of the school and the inclusion manager is now acting as the deputy headteacher. An experienced teacher has been seconded from another school to provide additional support in Year 6, consolidate assessment procedures throughout the school and provide additional senior leadership capacity. The school is in the process of recruiting further permanent staff for the start of the autumn term.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Although there is an improving picture of achievement, notably in the lower school and the Early Years Foundation Stage, the pattern overall remains patchy with pupils' outcomes still hampered by a legacy of underachievement over a number of years. This has had a particular impact on the pupils in the current Years 5 and 6 classes. Overall attainment continues to remain below the national average across the school. The legacy of inaccurate assessment also complicates the process of assessing the progress the pupils have made, especially where assessments have previously been grossly inflated, such as in the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, the school has put a great deal of work into ensuring that current assessments are more accurate and this should enable more accurate assessment of the progress the pupils are making in the future.

Concerns remain about the outcomes the pupils in Year 6 will attain in the forthcoming national tests. Although some progress has been made, there has been insufficient accelerated progress to bring them up to the levels required. In particular, the most able

pupils have not progressed as quickly as they should have and it is likely that few will attain the higher levels. Concerns were also identified with mathematics. Although there is plenty of evidence of number work, there is little to show that pupils have had sufficient practise and experience of solving problems and they are very insecure in this area of mathematics. Writing remains an issue, as it does throughout the school, with standards remaining low, and very few pupils working at or above age-related expectations. There remains a heavy reliance on interventions to enable pupils to catch up. Spelling, punctuation and grammar remain ongoing problems and continue to prevent many pupils from expressing themselves well through their writing. Boys, in particular, are the most careless and make far too many mistakes. There is little evidence to show that these are being corrected systematically across the school. Presentation is also variable with girls showing greater pride in their work.

The most significant improvement has occurred in the Early Years Foundation Stage and in Year 2. The Early Years Foundation Stage has been transformed with children genuinely engaged in their learning. This includes the boys who were noticeably disengaged and disruptive in the past. A more purposeful atmosphere was evident in which children were beginning to thrive. Many were mark making and shaping letters and beginning to form identifiable words, something which had been noticeably absent previously. They were also making good progress in their personal development and were observed working well collaboratively using wooden blocks to construct buildings they had seen in their recent walk in the local area. They were keen to share their achievements and were proud of the way their work was now being regularly celebrated on the school website and through floor books which support and track their learning journeys. Similarly, some good learning was observed in Year 2 and the quality of work in books shows that pupils are making much improved progress.

The quality of teaching

Although more good teaching was evident than previously, teaching still requires improvement. There continues to be variability across the school. Recent staffing stability has helped pupils settle into routines and has led to less disruption to their learning. The atmosphere around the school is more positive and reflects the increasing confidence of teachers and teaching assistants. There is a greater willingness to accept and act on advice.

There is still a dependency on adults to provide the correct answer, especially in the upper school where pupils have got into the habit of being guided to the correct answer or outcome. However, this does not mean they necessarily fully understand how they got that answer or the rationale behind an issue or particular argument. Getting something wrong can become a very powerful learning tool if pupils are able to reflect on their failings and correct them. For example, in one lesson observed pupils had written letters celebrating the attractions of Liverpool through persuasive text. Most of these letters were adequately written rather than well written. In this case, if pupils were asked to reflect on what they had written, consider how they could improve their argument and check errors in spelling and punctuation before redrafting their letter, outcomes could be much improved. Evidence from work shows that too little opportunity is given for pupils to correct their work and, as a result, many continue to make similar mistakes or not progress sufficiently to reach a higher level in their writing.

The learning environment in classrooms and around the school is much improved. Pupils commented positively about the changes. Displays are vibrant; they are changed regularly and celebrate pupils' work as well as support learning. Parents also commented that the school is a much more welcoming environment and they enjoyed seeing their children's work on the website or on display. Although there is variation across classes, the website is being used much more regularly to inform parents about what their children are doing and how they can support their child's learning. It is especially informative and useful in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

The teaching of phonics has improved since my last visit and is now delivered more consistently across the various groups. The investment in training is beginning to show beneficial gains. On the whole, the majority of teaching assistants are more secure in what is expected of them. Sessions are well organised and pupils have become familiar with routines. The inclusion manager, who also leads on the phonics programme, ensures that each pupil has his/her individual phonics book to enable monitoring to be effective and allow groupings to be changed as soon as necessary. The progress of pupils can be clearly identified through the phonics phases. Spelling tests have also been introduced but, as yet, the impact is not evident in much of the pupils' work. Similarly, guided reading is improving. I observed pupils on task and showing greater maturity to enable them to work on their own. No disruptive behaviour, which had affected sessions previously, was evident. Adult led sessions are well organised but some adults still need to engage better with their pupils. These weaker sessions restricted the opportunities for pupils to make better progress. Younger pupils are reading more regularly with the older pupils and are able to choose their own books, which are changed frequently. Active reading corners are evident in every classroom and the library has been restocked and is used regularly. Pupils spoke enthusiastically about the many new books they now have access to. I noted pupils using phonic decoding skills during their reading sessions and when reading independently.

Lessons are well planned, although at times rigidity in implementation does not allow some teachers the spontaneity to adapt to meet the pupils' needs fully as a lesson develops. There has, however, been a reduction in the use of worksheets, except in those lessons where teachers are less secure in the subject content. These tend to be subjects like history, science and geography where confidence in teaching aspects of these subjects remains fragile. Also, in these subjects, pupils are expected to complete the same work irrespective of their ability. In English and mathematics, teachers do set different tasks, but these still need to be better matched to pupils' abilities and specific requirements. The teaching of these subjects is, however, improving, although not yet consistently across the school. Pupils talked positively about their recent experiences in science or history where they were well informed 'about people who shape the world, such as Rosa Parks or Nelson Mandela'. They now enjoy a wider range of subjects than previously and identified that, 'lessons have got better' and that they did not dislike any because, 'they were no longer boring.'

Informative marking is more consistently evident and embedded in English and mathematics but still tends to be cursory in other subjects. Teachers also tend to over-praise and credit work which does not always merit it. Saying 'well done' when work is obviously not 'well done' does not encourage a pupil to reflect on their work and improve it. There is a fine balance between praise and correction. Currently, there is little evidence in pupils' work, in the majority of classes, to show that developmental points made by the teacher are being acted on and are leading to sustained improvement.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour continues to improve and in the sessions I observed I saw no evidence of disruptive behaviour. Pupils and parents have noted that attitudes to school and learning are much improved. Pupils' greater engagement in lessons has played a large part in the decreasing levels of poorer behaviour. Pupils are more attentive and no longer fidget in lessons. Self-discipline has improved and there are fewer interruptions to the flow of lessons. This has been the first term with a degree of consistent staffing in place and this has clearly made a difference. The obvious improvement in the Early Years Foundation Stage was particularly praised by parents and they were very pleased with the positive impact this has had on their children's behaviour and learning. As one parent explained, 'My son has come on in leaps and bounds. I can clearly see the progress he is making every week.'

Attendance continues to improve and persistent absenteeism has also decreased. As a result, attendance is now close to the national average. Pupils are motivated to attend school not only by the improved atmosphere and teaching but also by the use of rewards and incentives which have become a part of everyday school life.

Safeguarding requirements are in place and are secure.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The need to stabilise the school has been well managed by senior leaders in the school with the support of the local authority and diocese. There is now a positive and vibrant atmosphere around the school which is more conducive to learning. There is not only a greater sense of 'community' and an increasing pride in what has been achieved but also a clear understanding that still more needs to be done. The confidence of parents in the school and the improvements that are taking place has increased. This was exemplified by one parent who had removed her children from the school when it went into special measures and has now brought them back to St Finbar's: 'It was the biggest mistake I have ever made and I wish I had never done it.' Parents feel that the school is more open and transparent and that staff and senior leaders are more readily accessible and visible around the school.

A negative parental attitude towards the school is now being reversed and there is evidence of greater parental involvement in their children's learning. This is especially noticeable in the Early Years Foundation Stage where home-school liaison has improved. Parents mentioned several initiatives to support this, such as the 'learning story' book that the children bring home every day, which encourages parents to comment on their children's work. Parents are welcomed and the numbers becoming involved in the school are growing. A parents and teachers association has been set up and volunteers now hold coffee mornings to encourage greater parental involvement. They also support and are involved in lunch-time and after-school clubs.

In the absence of the headteacher, the temporary senior leaders have ensured that the pace of improvement has not faltered and they have been instrumental in upholding staff morale. Clear systems and procedures to improve learning are in place and are being implemented across the school. Lessons and pupils' work are monitored regularly. However, this currently focuses more on compliance rather than the quality of provision. Procedures for the teaching of phonics and reading are more firmly embedded than writing. Although assessment is more accurate, the use of assessment to identify and plan for needs of specific groups of pupils or for individuals is less well embedded. Pupil progress meetings are, however, helping to identify pupils who are underachieving or may need additional support.

The restructuring of the curriculum and the change to teaching subjects discretely is also beginning to have a noticeable impact. Pupils and parents are positive about the increasing number of enrichment opportunities being made available through lunch-time and after-school clubs and visits. Pupils spoke excitedly about visits to Eureka as part of their work in science and their visit to central Liverpool to support work in history and geography. Pupils also noted the improvements in the library in terms of the variety of books now available and the equipment purchased to support physical education lessons. One parent was proud of, 'the delight on her son's face as he took part in a cross country event', something that pupils had not participated in previously. Parents are supportive of the changes being made to the curriculum and the increased opportunities for visits and visitors to the school. This is raising aspirations and making pupils and parents more aware of the opportunities that exist around them.

Governors continue to monitor the progress that is being made through monthly meetings of the monitoring group. They have played a significant role in liaising with the local authority to ensure that staffing is stabilised and they are very aware of how crucial it is that this stability is maintained. They are currently involved in the process of recruiting for vacant posts to ensure that current staffing stability continues into the next academic year. The recent appointment of a parent governor reflects the improved relationships which now exist with the wider school community.

External support

The local authority, in partnership with the diocese, continues to monitor and support the school well, including the brokerage of support and staffing from other schools. This has supported some noticeable improvements, especially in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Personnel from the local authority have worked hard to resolve the staffing problems which have plagued the school and prevented progress in the past. A detailed review of provision last term identified strengths and weaknesses as well as celebrated the progress that was being made. The local authority is committed to providing ongoing support in the immediate and foreseeable future to ensure that the gains made this year are consolidated.