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4 July 2014

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

Dear Mrs Blanden

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

Following my visit with Barbara Saltmarsh, Additional inspector, and Fiona Bridger-Wilkinson, seconded headteacher, to your school on 2–3 July 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 fourth 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 appoint one newly qualified teacher, with my approval, 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 Archdiocese 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 fourth monitoring inspection on 2 and 3 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, acting headteacher and middle leaders. Teaching was observed in all classes, including several lessons jointly observed with senior leaders. Some shorter visits to lessons were also made. Inspectors met with governors, including the Chair of the Governing Body. Meetings were also held with the Director of the Diocese and two representatives from the local authority. Inspectors met with groups of pupils in Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 and also spoke informally to many pupils in lessons and at lunchtimes. An inspector spoke to some parents and carers at the start of the school day. Inspectors evaluated a sample of pupils' work from all year groups.

Context

The substantive headteacher, who was in post at the time of the section 5 inspection in March 2013, continues to be absent from the school.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils' achievement continues to improve and standards are rising. There are good indications that the end-of-Key Stage 2 results this year have improved when compared with results from previous years. However, at the time of the monitoring inspection visit, the national level boundaries for the tests had not been set.

More pupils in all year groups now meet age-related expectations for their progress and attainment. Concerns about the progress of pupils in Year 2 have been slightly allayed because their progress has accelerated in the last term. Pupils eligible for additional funding have made better progress than their peers and their attainment is now broadly on a similar level as others'. Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are making better progress.

The headteacher has identified some small groups of pupils and individuals who are at risk of not making enough progress. This has led to more intensive support for these pupils to ensure that they gain more ground and begin to meet age-related expectations. The most able pupils still do not make enough progress to achieve the highest levels of which they are capable. School leaders have also correctly identified that some pupils do not make enough progress in writing.

Increasingly, class teachers take more responsibility for the achievement of individual pupils in their classes and can analyse in fine detail what each pupil needs to learn in order to make more progress. Pupils who need more support are identified in the six-weekly pupil progress meetings and attend extra sessions to support their literacy and numeracy. This is a major factor contributing to their improved achievement in English and mathematics.

However, there is not enough close attention paid to improving pupils' writing in subjects other than English. Pupils do not have the opportunity to consolidate good habits of accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar because their writing in these subjects is not marked carefully enough. The school is not doing enough to encourage pupils to read more widely and maximise their use of the library. In some cases, pupils are not taught the skills they need to retrieve the correct meaning from a text or to 'read between the lines'. The teaching and assessment of reading at the higher levels is not sufficiently systematic.

The quality of teaching

Improvements to teaching seen at the previous monitoring inspection have been sustained and consolidated. Much teaching is now typically good, with very few occasions when teaching requires improvement or is inadequate. Teachers are much more direct about what they want pupils to learn and how they will achieve success. Pupils told inspectors that teachers now make clear what they are aiming for and provide useful lists of 'success criteria' to guide them through each piece of work. Teachers have improved their classroom layouts; rooms are tidier and pupils find it easier to fetch materials to use. Pupils consult key words and examples of 'working out' on the 'learning walls'. There is a more tangible sense of pride in the achievements of the pupils too; examples of pupils' writing and artwork are neatly and interestingly displayed to celebrate pupils' efforts and excellent work.

Pupils have extra challenges and well-planned activities at the start of the day to extend their thinking and skills. More teachers use questioning effectively to help pupils develop their reasoning skills and pupils are encouraged to give extended answers and improve their fluency in speaking. This is particularly successful with those pupils who speak English as an additional language and those who need to acquire a wider vocabulary. Teachers are more conscious of the progress pupils make within the lesson and ensure that they check understanding and tackle misconceptions promptly. Pupils are involved in the process of checking and assessing their own learning; for example, teachers show good examples of pupils' work on the visualiser as a stimulus for discussion and to help pupils to improve.

Where teaching is less effective, the most able pupils are not sufficiently stretched and challenged. Pupils who struggle with some aspects of work are supported well in lessons, but when the teacher or teaching assistant moves to support other pupils, some pupils are 'adrift' and are not developing the skills and resilience to work unsupported for even short periods of time. More work needs to be done to ensure that pupils who receive intensive support both in and out of their regular classes are provided with activities and skills to practise on their own.

Teacher-directed learning activities for children in the Reception classes are successful and lead to good progress and development of reading, writing and number skills. However, children do not often initiate activities themselves, which would help to develop their sense of curiosity and establish strong working habits for Key Stage 1.

Pupils' work is marked regularly. However, not all teachers follow the school's marking guidelines and there is a lot of variability from year to year and class to class in terms of the quality of guidance to pupils. Some teachers provide specific 'next steps' and follow-up tasks for pupils to complete, but vague reminders to pupils about 'remembering to use capital letters next time' mean pupils rarely act upon the advice and learn from their mistakes.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour continues to be good, as at the previous monitoring inspection and at the section 5 inspection in March 2013. Pupils are friendly and happy and the school is very successful in developing their social skills and courtesy. Pupils from the Reception Year to Year 6 greet their teachers and visitors politely and hold open doors for adults and each other. Behaviour at lunchtimes and break times is also good. Pupils understand the fundamental importance about cooperating with each other, taking turns, sharing and presenting themselves well. Pupils attend well and rates of persistent absence for individual pupils have decreased since the section 5 inspection. School leaders have worked hard to improve punctuality. The importance of good attendance and punctuality is reinforced through newsletters and the school website. Pupils enjoy earning the care of the 'punctuality pup' or 'attendance Ted' as a reward.

Pupils are safe in the school. Tolerance is promoted strongly and the school is proud of the pupils' diverse backgrounds and many home languages. Pupils are also proud to be peer mediators and 'young interpreters'. Pupils told the inspectors that there are very few incidents of bullying and the school's records of incidents of poor behaviour support this view. A parent or carer told an inspector that the school is 'a kind school'.

Inspectors observed no disruptive behaviour, although when interest in the lesson flagged or when there was not enough challenge in the work, a very few pupils became distracted from the tasks set. A few older pupils also commented on chatter in lessons that disturbed their concentration.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The work of the acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher to transform teaching has gone from strength to strength. There is no doubt that the school's focus is wholly on pupils' learning and enabling them to make rapid progress from their starting points. Teaching staff and teaching assistants are receptive to all the support and training they have had to improve their practice. Senior leaders' checks on teaching and analyses of pupils' progress are linked explicitly to training and also performance management. Teaching assistants told inspectors that they also felt more valued and that their performance management is leading to better opportunities for them to extend their skills.

At the previous monitoring inspections there were concerns about the coherence of plans to improve the achievement of pupils with special educational needs. It is very encouraging to see stronger leadership in this area. As a result of carefully planned

programmes of extra help, pupils with special educational needs, pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils with English as an additional language now make better progress. Teachers are more confident about planning for these pupils in their classes.

Most of the work to improve teaching continues to be driven by the acting headteacher and acting deputy headteacher. As a result, they are still reliant on the external support of the executive headteacher to lead the public face of the school. Middle leaders understand that they have a role to play in leading improvements and are ready to take up the challenge. However, middle leaders are not yet given enough responsibility for monitoring teaching and evaluating pupils' progress. Job descriptions and roles for middle leaders are not clear enough for them to perform their role with confidence and direction. There is a gap in leadership for literacy and the work to improve reading and writing across the curriculum is not being pushed strongly enough.

Governors have continued to develop their roles and improvements seen at the previous monitoring inspection. They are now fully established. They have acquired a thorough knowledge of the school and they make sure that answers to their questions are backed up by clear evidence. Governors are planning ambitiously for the school's future, including for the school to become a sponsored academy. Nevertheless, they also take proper account of the school's current position and the need for continued rapid improvement. Governors rightly acknowledge that they need to do more to develop their monitoring role in order to match what they hear from school leaders with what is seen in the school on a day-to-day basis. Governors have attended relevant training, and like the rest of the school, they have grasped opportunities to learn with enthusiasm and energy, while maintaining a realistic view of the performance of the school.

External support

The support from the local authority has sharply focused on the key areas for improvement. The school improvement advisor has quickly identified the key strengths in the school leaders and forged productive and professional relationships dedicated to improving teaching. The executive headteacher has a wealth of experience. She provides sensitive challenge for the acting headteacher and deputy headteacher, while supporting with external aspects of the school's work. Coaching support from the teaching and learning consultant and rigorous monitoring from the senior leadership team have proved to be the right recipe for improving the leadership of special educational needs. Strong direction from the local authority and the diocese is helping to maintain and increase the pace of improvement. However, school leaders have not yet shown that they have the capacity to sustain the rate of improvement with a reduced level of external support. This will be important to demonstrate as the school approaches the next monitoring inspection.