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Mrs Claire Speakman
Headteacher
St Alban's Roman Catholic Primary School Blackburn
Trinity Street
Blackburn
Lancashire
BB1 5BN

Dear Mrs Speakman

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Alban's Roman Catholic Primary School Blackburn, Blackburn with Darwen

Following my visit to your school on 12 September 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on 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 May 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

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

- review the current improvement plan to ensure that it is firmly focussed on the points for improvement outlined in the last inspection report. Specific actions need to be firmly directed at directly improving middle leaders, teaching, classroom practice and outcomes for pupils across the full range of subjects
- ensure that all key policies, such as the calculation policy are reviewed and in place in order to provide guidance on what is expected and that these policies are consistently applied across the school
- develop the skills of middle leaders to enable them to lead and develop their subject areas. In particular to empower them to provide resources and ideas to colleagues who lack the subject knowledge to teach a particular subject effectively
- restructure subject leadership across the school to ensure that there is clear line of accountability for implementing the new national curriculum effectively

- initiate an independent review of governance to identify gaps in experience to enable relevant training to be provided which ensures governors are more confident and secure in challenging school managers about the progress the school is making.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with yourself, a small group of governors as well as several pupils from Year 6. A meeting was also held with the local authority adviser to discuss the action taken since the last inspection and the level of support provided. The school's development and curriculum plans, alongside other documentation which you provided, were evaluated. In addition, a learning walk with yourself focussed on the learning environment around the school with a particular focus on how effectively literacy is being promoted.

Context

Since the previous inspection there have been no significant changes in staffing other than the re-organisation of teaching assistants roles and responsibilities. A new local authority representative has also joined the governing body.

Main findings

The current action plan, although focussed on improving aspects of the school, particularly mathematics, reading and writing, does not focus sufficiently on the key action points identified during the previous inspection. Strategies to improve teaching across the school and developing the role of subject leaders are not precise enough. The plan also lacks rigour in identifying the types of resources or external support needed to improve teachers' skills, subject knowledge and impact in the classroom. There are clear procedures being established to improve the monitoring of teaching as well as pupil progress. For example, pupil progress meetings are now part of the established structure. Milestones tend to focus on monitoring actions rather than being specifically linked to pupil outcomes. The plan also fails to address in a cohesive way the requirement to 'raise challenge for pupils, including the more able through lessons and the curriculum'.

Pupils who were interviewed were very positive about the school and had noticed that some improvements are being made. As a headteacher you have provided stability to the school and improved staff morale. Pupils were adamant that they enjoyed school and felt part of the whole school family. They felt that although lessons were not easy they were not difficult either. They had noted that the marking and feedback they received was becoming more detailed and informative. They enjoy reading but concerns arise as to why so many Year 6 pupils are still on reading schemes and are not yet free readers.

Although the school has planned to implement the new national curriculum, weaknesses in coverage and potential delivery remain because subject leaders are not sufficiently clear about what needs to be done to teach and develop their subject area. For example, training on assessment for the new national curriculum will not in itself improve history, geography, art and design technology when the key issue is to ensure quality teaching and coverage. Middle and subject leaders continue to be a work in progress. The current organisation of subject responsibilities also means that the workload for developing foundation subjects such as history, geography, music etc. is shared by only two teachers. As a result, the teaching programme does not provide sufficient rigour to support the development of SMSC

(spiritual, moral, social and cultural education) in depth. Subject leaders are provided with time to fulfil their duties but need to ensure that this is spent wisely on improving classroom provision rather than an on-going programme of continuous auditing and monitoring.

The school is improving although issues still remain about writing and there is an over-reliance on interventions to raise standards. There is a realisation that the rate of improvement needs to be increased if the school is to get to good by the next inspection. A programme of professional development has been initiated but this needs to be focussed on individual needs as well as broader generic school aspects.

Governors are better informed about the progress being made and are well intentioned but need to become more challenging about the rate of progress being made towards rectifying weaknesses. As a group, governors require further development and training in various aspects of their work. The school is receptive to advice and keen to make further improvements as soon as possible.

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 local authority has maintained a continuous monitoring presence and provided some additional funding as it realises that the school does require on-going support. It is also prepared to broker a review of governance as quickly as possible to ensure that this area can be strengthened. There is a clear understanding of what needs to be done including the need for further management support.

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

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow

Her Majesty's Inspector