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5 February 2015

Miss Tracey Chappell
Headteacher
Seghill First School
Seghill
Cramlington
Northumberland
NE23 7SB

Dear Miss Chappell

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Seghill First School, Northumberland

Following my visit to your school on 4 February 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in October 2013. 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 last section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- provide a greater level of challenge for the most able pupils, from the very start of the lesson, so that they can reach their full potential
- ensure agreed policies and procedures, for example around marking and feedback, are consistently applied by teachers in all classes.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, middle leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body and three other governors and a representative from the local authority, to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I also spoke briefly over the telephone with the National Leader of Education (NLE) who is supporting the school. I reviewed the school improvement plan, looked at the most

recent information regarding pupils' progress and, accompanied by the headteacher, visited each class to observe the quality of teaching, review the standard of pupils' work over time and speak informally to pupils about their learning.

Context

Staffing within the early years has changed significantly since the s5 inspection. The reception teacher left at the end of the summer term following a period of absence. Two, part-time teachers were sought quickly as replacements. One of these teachers is currently absent from school; the other teacher has stepped up to a full-time teaching commitment as a means of cover. At the end of December 2014, the early years leader also left their post. A teacher has been recruited, initially for two terms, to teach the nursery class. The governing body are about to instigate a review of the early years staffing structure to ensure greater stability in the future.

A new Chair of the Governing Body was elected in September 2014. Three parent governors joined the governing body during the summer term and a co-opted member joined in January 2015.

Main findings

You have worked well with a number of key partners since the last monitoring visit. Stronger systems and processes are now in place to check on the difference actions are making to pupils' progress and hold staff to account for the quality of their work. This has led to a much clearer picture, both for yourself and for governors, of what is working well and where further improvement is needed. You have now steered the school back onto a secure trajectory for improvement but the journey to date has been far from easy. The realisation that your improvement strategy was not rigorous enough at the outset, together with significant staffing issues, has led to a more difficult start than expected. Although you are now working at greater speed, there is little time left until the next s5 inspection and much still remains to be done. Everyone is fully aware that this may not be long enough for the new approaches to teaching and leadership to fully embed; securing a good or better judgement at the time of the next inspection is by no means a guarantee.

The recognition that you cannot keep a check on the work of the school solely by yourself has led to the appropriate delegation of tasks and the strengthening of middle leadership. As a result, subject leaders have grown in confidence and now have a higher threshold for what is acceptable practice in their subjects. They are well aware that new policies and ways of working are not yet consistent across all classes. For example, not all teachers provide regular 'fix it' time for pupils to read the comments in their books and make a response. Similarly, while some staff are using assessment information well to provide a greater level of challenge for the most able pupils, others plan for additional, extension tasks to occupy their 'fast finishers' once the main work has been completed. This slows pupils' progress and stops the most able from reaching their full potential.

Staffing difficulties in the early years have been unavoidable but you have tackled them head on and ensured minimum disruption to children's learning. The work in children's books shows that a more consistent and systematic approach to phonics is paying dividends; children are undeterred by tricky words and show an eagerness to write. While there remains work to be done, children have an increasing confidence in their abilities to communicate effectively.

Governors have strengthened their knowledge and understanding of the school's work. New members, many with recent experience of education, have contributed to a more forensic analysis of pupil achievement data; consequently, more challenging questions are being asked of leaders. Importantly, this has been supplemented by a systematic programme of visits to classrooms and the direct request for subject leaders to present updates about their work. Governors no longer rely on the views of the headteacher alone. They have become far more proactive in seeking out their own information and seeing, at first-hand, the difference actions are making to the quality of teaching and pupils' progress to verify what they have been told.

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

Partnership working with a NLE through the Tyne Valley Teaching School Alliance has been effective in demonstrating to you a more rigorous system for monitoring and evaluating the day-to-day work of the school. The provision of a Specialist Leader of Education (SLE) has also been beneficial in ensuring much needed continuity of practice for children in the early years during a time of significant staff change. Funding has been secured for this effective partnership working to continue for the next two terms.

The local authority has maintained an appropriate overview of the improvement work undertaken at the school. A recently commissioned review by an external consultant has enabled support to be targeted at the most important areas in the time remaining before the next s5 inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland.

Yours sincerely

Lee Owston

Her Majesty's Inspector