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Mrs Sarah Stevens
Headteacher
St Nicholas CofE (VA) Primary School and Nursery
Six Hills Way
Stevenage
Hertfordshire
SG2 0PZ

Dear Mrs Stevens

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Nicholas CofE (VA) Primary School and Nursery

Following my visit to your school on 1 July 2014, 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 December 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 recent section 5 inspection. The school should take further action to:

- continue to improve the quality of teaching and embed the implementation of the new curriculum so that the standards achieved by all pupils fully reflect the excellent actions taken by leaders to improve the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the headteacher, the English subject leader, six members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. The school improvement plan, self-evaluation, assessment information, safeguarding documentation and information from the monitoring of teaching were analysed. The inspector visited all classes together with the headteacher and spoke

to pupils about their work and the changes being made to their school. Examples of work from all year groups across subjects were scrutinised.

Context

An interim headteacher was in post for the autumn term and the substantive headteacher took up her position in January this year. A Year 3 teacher left the school in December 2014; this position has been covered for the spring and summer terms by two teachers known to leaders. The Chair of the Governing Body has resigned, three further governors have left and the governing body has reconstituted with a smaller membership.

Main findings

The interim headteacher provided secure leadership in the autumn term and a well-planned handover to the new headteacher enabled her to make a rapid start to improving the school. She has implemented rigorous and effective strategies and processes for monitoring the work of the school and for identifying its strengths and the aspects that require the most improvement. Actions to address priorities are taken very quickly; consequently significant improvement is evident in very many aspects of the school's work. Staff and pupil morale is high and the school community has been galvanised to expect higher standards and to engage in the drive to achieve them.

Planning for improvement is thorough, staff responsibilities are explicit with challenging targets and rigorous timescales set by which these are expected to be achieved. Staff training is carefully planned and followed up to make sure their new learning makes a difference to pupils' learning and well-being.

High expectations have been set for all subject leaders. In a very short time they have put in place exemplification of the standards expected of pupils and have started to analyse the quality of teaching and achievement in their subject. As one pupil in Year 3 said 'I love history, when you come to school you don't know what you are interested in but teachers help you to know and get good at it'. The English subject leader is monitoring teaching, achievement and progress in depth, she has implemented a range of strategies to enliven learning and ensure pupils are taught well. Through her involvement in an external project she is revitalising how pupils are taught to write and aligning these developments with improving pupils' reading skills.

Teaching has continued to improve and the vast majority is well evidenced as good. A significant number of observations of teaching have informed the actions taken to improve it. The headteacher quickly supported subject leaders to develop the skills necessary to monitor and improve the quality of teaching and learning in their subjects. She has drawn on external expertise to enhance this understanding and used observations of effective practice in school and in other schools to ensure staff

know what is expected. This is reflected in the quality of pupils' work seen; standards of presentation are higher, all work is marked in accordance with school policy and pupils say it is helping them to make better progress. Expectations for pupils' learning are made clear to them in each lesson and the level of challenge they are faced with increased as they make progress. In a few instances seen, pupils' responses to their teachers' marking or their peers' review of their work lacked the high standards evident in the majority of their work.

Systems of tracking pupils' achievement are thorough, staff are held to account for the progress the pupils in their care make, and are supported where wider action is required. As a result any gaps in the attainment of different groups, including pupils identified as disadvantaged, with English as an additional language or who have special educational needs, are closing quickly.

Assessment information and pupils' work suggests that pupils are making improved progress and that standards at the end of Key Stage 1 and 2 are higher. The attention given to improving the teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) has resulted in children in the early years using their skills well to write at sometimes very high standards. The proportion of pupils in Year 1 who have attained the expected standard in their use of phonics has increased and is well above the national outcomes for 2014.

Governors have used the outcomes of a review of their work and a skills audit to good advantage. Individuals are linked to priority areas for monitoring purposes and are increasingly well informed because they scrutinise the work of the school carefully through well planned activities, some of which they undertake with leaders. For example, participating in a scrutiny of writing, visiting to ensure safeguarding practices are effective or analysing the impact of support for pupils who have special educational needs. They value the improved rigour and detail of self-evaluation put in place by the headteacher. This is enabling them to ensure the school meets statutory requirements in aspects of its work such as safeguarding and to understand how well all groups of pupils in every year group are achieving.

Ofsted may carry out further monitoring inspections and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

The headteacher has quickly established positive relationships with the Diocese, the local authority and with other local leaders. She uses these well to support school improvement priorities, to ensure that teachers' assessments are accurate and to validate her own and other leaders' analyses. The local authority has provided good support and rigorous challenge to leaders particularly through a review undertaken in April. The outcomes of this were quickly acted on and led to a clearer analysis of the quality of teaching.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire and the Diocesan Director of Education for the Diocese of St Albans.

Yours sincerely

Prue Rayner
Her Majesty's Inspector