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Ms Angela Grace
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Grace

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Penketh South Community School

Following my visit to your school on 26 January 2016, 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in March 2015. 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, in order to become a good school. The school should take further action to:

- use the review of the current school improvement plan to set a clear course of action to take the school to good at its next inspection
- set sharp success criteria, with clear milestones, so that staff, governors and parents can more readily check on the progress of the school towards good
- ensure that the school's website fully meets requirements.

Evidence

During the inspection, I held meetings with you and your senior leaders to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I also met with three members of the governing body (a fourth member joined us for the final meeting), six subject leaders and a representative from the local authority. I met with another local

headteacher who is supporting you. I chatted to a group of eight Year 6 pupils to gain their views on the school and took into consideration the results from the school's recent parent survey. You and I visited every classroom to observe pupils at work and to look at their books. I looked at the work in a sample of books from pupils in Years 4, 5 and 6. I evaluated the school's improvement plan, records relating to pupils' achievement and your checks on the quality of teaching.

Context

Since the previous inspection, the deputy headteacher has retired from the school and an acting deputy headteacher was in place until December 2015. In September, the Year 1 teacher returned from maternity leave and a newly qualified teacher (NQT) joined the school. The NQT left the school in December 2015 and a new deputy headteacher started at the school in January 2016. Shortly after the previous inspection, the Chair of the Governing Body resigned and a new Chair was appointed. Five more governors subsequently resigned from their roles and two new members were appointed. There are currently four vacancies on the governing body. At the time of this inspection, the Reception teacher was on sickness leave.

Main findings

The findings from the recent inspection were not a surprise to you, the staff or governors, as you all recognised that the school's effectiveness had dropped. You had already taken action to tackle the identified weaknesses but further action was delayed due to the uncertainty of the inspection outcome. Once the judgement was confirmed, you, governors and staff responded positively; morale is high. You all share the same determination and drive to make Penketh South a good school and improve outcomes for pupils.

You have strengthened the senior leadership team with the appointment of a new deputy headteacher, so that the task of improving the school does not rest just on you. She brings with her considerable expertise in rapid school improvement, which is valuable for Penketh South. Your review of the roles and responsibilities of the senior leadership team means that all members now understand their part in the school improvement journey.

The quality of teaching is improving because of the action you are taking. Your own records reflect improvements in individual teachers' skills as a result of support and challenge. Teachers have relished the training you have provided, resulting in increased confidence and raised expectations for themselves and their pupils. Teachers and teaching assistants have visited other schools to see good and outstanding practice. Teachers are self-reflective and use professional discussion to share ideas and support each other. Through using more reliable assessment information, teachers, including those in the Early Years Foundation Stage, plan work that is based on what pupils know and can do. Throughout lessons, teachers check pupils' understanding and adapt learning activities as pupils make progress.

You agree that this is not fully embedded. Scrutiny of pupils' books shows that the work that teachers set for them is increasingly matched to their levels of ability; several pupils say that work is more challenging, but some say they would like harder work.

You have updated the school's marking policy, which has clear guidance for the amount of marking to be completed. Pupils understand the symbols used and feel that most teachers use this consistently. Pupils receive guidance on how to improve their work and say they like the 'review and do' time as it helps them make progress. You know that there is still opportunity for teachers to be even more precise about how pupils can improve their work.

Pupils' skills in spelling, grammar and punctuation are improving. The introduction of a whole-school scheme provides a consistent approach, so pupils know what to expect in each class. They are starting to use these skills in writing in other subjects. A whole-school push on developing reasoning and thinking skills so that pupils solve mathematical problems is bearing fruit. Investment in a wide range of mathematical equipment means that pupils have the aids to solve problems which help their growing resilience to work logically through each step of a calculation. During my visits to classrooms I watched pupils grappling with problems and persisting until they had solved them. In order for pupils to improve basic skills and close gaps in learning, the school has introduced 'maths passports'. Pupils are eager to complete the different levels and so are working hard on, for example, learning times tables.

Everyone knows there is still much to do to make sure that the school is judged good at the time of the next inspection. Outcomes for younger pupils are to be celebrated. Results at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage are now above average; similarly, the scores for the checks on Year 1 pupils' understanding of sounds and letters are above average. Such achievements in the early stages of pupils' education stand them in good stead for later success. These are improvements since the previous inspection. However, the results in 2015 were disappointing for pupils in Year 2 and Year 6. Work in pupils' books and your own information points to a better picture for pupils across the school as they make quicker progress. Despite this, pupils in Year 6 still have a long way to go, as weaker teaching over time has resulted in gaps in their learning. You know this already and, together with governors, have taken action to accelerate progress for these pupils. Stronger teaching is starting to close these gaps and support programmes are used to help pupils' learning move faster.

You are using a much wider variety of information than in the past to keep your eye on teaching. Through rigorous pupil progress meetings, checks on pupils' work, visits to classrooms and talking to pupils, you have an accurate view of teaching. Teachers are in no doubt that they are held responsible for the progress of their pupils. You capture all this information on 'a teacher on a page' document and give clear targets to help teachers improve their teaching. You then provide professional activities to make sure that this improvement happens.

You created your development plan to support improvement in the short term. You focused on the areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection report. You set clear measures of success and appropriate timescales. It was fit for purpose and enabled the school to make initial improvements. You, senior leaders and governors all know what action is necessary to make sure that the school is good at the next inspection. It is timely to use your thorough review to set the course for the longer term: setting clear success measures based on the accelerated progress of pupils and how this will be achieved. In this way, all involved will be able to celebrate success and challenge any slippage as you journey to good.

Middle and subject leaders are very enthusiastic and are ready to make a much stronger contribution to school improvement. Through coaching from the local authority, consultants and members of the local school alliance, they are growing in confidence. Several have a better understanding of their areas of responsibility through visiting classrooms, checking pupils' work and talking to pupils. This is especially so for the two joint leaders of mathematics. Leaders in this subject have led staff training sessions in 'mastery', to make sure that teachers plan learning which allows pupils to use their mathematical skills to solve problems by using reasoning and logic. Consequently, pupils are getting a better experience of mathematics and are building resilience for this subject. You have allocated time over the coming year for leaders in all subjects to have the opportunity to check on pupils' learning in their subject.

The new Chair of Governors immediately set about a reconstitution of governance, which included the appointment of two new members. Governors undertook an audit of skills so that members would be equipped with the right spread of skills to contribute to improvement. A review of governance was undertaken in September 2015 and the governors quickly drew up an action plan to guide their work. Governors know the school and have taken steps to get to know the school even more thoroughly by, for example, linking with a subject leader and visiting during school time. As a result, they are more prepared to challenge the decisions made by leaders; this is evident in the challenging questions governors ask at meetings. Governors agree that it is timely to set a new action plan to guide their work and develop their skills as a governing body; this will align with the school improvement plan. It is imperative that the vacancies are filled quickly so that the work of governance does not remain with a few members. Governors agreed that there were a few items of information missing from the school's website and immediately took action to rectify these omissions.

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

You, your leadership team and governors are supported well by the local authority and the local Teaching School Alliance. You have used the offers of support from various external agencies well to make sure that the school receives exactly what it needs. Teachers consider the training in the quality of teaching and learning to have been particularly helpful.

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

Yours sincerely

Eileen Mulgrew
Her Majesty's Inspector