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Mrs Kathryn Carruthers
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Dear Mrs Carruthers

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Upton Westlea Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 13 May 2016, accompanied by Mark Quinn HMI, 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 September 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 last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you, the chair of the governing body and four other governors as well as a group of pupils from Year 6. I also talked to pupils informally around the school. A meeting was held with the local authority school improvement adviser to discuss the action taken since the last inspection and the level of support provided. The school's development plan, self-evaluation and a range of additional documentation which you provided were also scrutinised. In addition, I conducted a series of short visits to classrooms with you, focusing on the learning environment and the quality of writing.

Context

Since the last inspection you have made some significant changes. A new senior leadership team has been created and several curriculum/subject leader responsibilities have been reallocated. The deputy headteacher has temporarily been made a non-teaching deputy to enable him to coach and mentor several teachers who require additional support. Two teachers and a teaching assistant have left the school. The teaching posts have been filled by one temporary appointment and one teacher who has increased her commitment to full-time. The governing body has been reconstituted, following a review, with two new governors being appointed – replacing one who had resigned. A new generic timetable has been put in place and the school day has been reorganised with pupils now able to gain access to the school from 8.35am.

Main findings

Since the inspection you have ensured that there is a clear and shared vision for the school. Your efforts are beginning to change the culture of the school with a clearer focus on the well-being of the pupils, raising aspirations and improving outcomes.

Clear procedures and new management structures have been put in place. A new senior leadership team has been established and middle leaders are being given greater autonomy to begin to develop and monitor their areas of responsibility. The start of the school day has been brought forward to enable pupils to meet socially, settle in and prepare for the day's learning before formal lessons begin. This also provides an opportunity for teachers to meet and greet parents. A new timetable ensures that all lessons in key subjects such as reading, writing and mathematics are taught at the same time. This enables pupils to be moved easily between phonics groups and ensures that withdrawal for additional support activities causes minimum disruption to learning. Reorganisation such as this has helped improve the smooth day-to-day running of the school. Weak practice has been challenged and there has been some resultant reorganisation of classes. Assessment procedures have been reviewed and approaches more appropriate to the needs of the school have recently been adopted. Monitoring procedures are now formally in place. Lessons in English and mathematics are regularly monitored, on a termly basis, in every year group through lesson observations, scrutiny of pupils' work and of teachers' planning. It is planned to extend this to foundation subjects in the near future. A common planning format is now established to encourage greater consistency across the school. Pay progression of teachers is more sharply linked to improved outcomes for pupils alongside a programme of bespoke professional development. Better use is being made of data and information to enable teachers to quickly identify any underachievement and allow earlier intervention, especially for those pupils who are disadvantaged.

These developments, although necessary, have not yet had sufficient time to impact on standards and achievement. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is currently not closing quickly enough. The impact is also mixed, with the gap closing for some of these pupils but not all. Progress in writing, especially, requires further improvement. At present, inconsistencies remain across classes with several teachers receiving additional support to improve performance. Writing in other subjects across the curriculum also requires further development because pupils are not always provided with appropriate activities to enable them to transfer their writing skills into other contexts.

During our visits to classrooms we noticed that pupils were enthusiastic and keen to learn. However, many lacked the resilience and confidence to take greater responsibility for their learning. For example, pupils are aware that they are making grammatical and spelling errors in their writing but many do not have the self-conviction to correct these. A dependency culture persists, which is a legacy of their classroom experiences from previous years. Writing, however, has a higher profile around the school with examples of written work on display in many areas.

Pupils interviewed were very positive about the changes you have initiated and they all felt that, in the short time you have been in post, the school has improved. They identified that new initiatives such as spelling journals were helping them to improve their work. They were very pleased that you had taken a strong stance on bullying which, in their opinion, is now very much reduced. They stated that your approach through assemblies has raised their awareness of the hurt that bullying can cause and this has resulted in more thoughtful behaviour. Pupils are also aware of the changes beginning to occur in the classroom with increased interaction and engagement. They feel that these changes are making lessons more enjoyable. They also approve of the earlier start to the school day, which allows them to socialise with their friends. Pupils have noted the recent upgrading of computer equipment around the school and the wider range of extra-curricular activities which are now available after school. They appreciate that they no longer have to pay for many of these after-school activities and this has encouraged greater participation. In addition, they value and enjoy the wide range of opportunities now available to visit places of interest, the theatre and museums, etc. The reward system, 'Dojos', has been recently introduced and this has captured their imagination and is proving a good incentive to try harder in lessons. Older pupils felt that they were ready to accept greater responsibilities around the school.

Governors are aware that the outcomes of the recent inspection were a 'shock' and a 'big reality check'. This has prompted a review of their practice, roles and responsibilities. The governing body has been reconstituted, with several new governors now in post. There is now a much better balance of skills and experiences available. Governors now play a more prominent role in the school; they are more visible and recognised by pupils. Each month a governor will visit

classes, present awards, have dinner with the pupils and attend both formal and informal school functions to meet the parents. Governors rotate this role to ensure that eventually they are all involved in this process. There is now a clear sense of purpose and challenge. They are now attending more training, including safeguarding, to ensure that they are better equipped and more knowledgeable to enable them to challenge school leaders with confidence. There is now greater transparency in the working of the governing body and information is readily exchanged between governors and school leaders. The headteacher provides a monthly newsletter for governors to update them on the progress being made as well as to celebrate any achievements. A termly update also keeps parents better informed. Working with parents is now a priority for the school.

External support

Local authority officers and support staff have visited the school on a regular basis. They have monitored progress, and provided advice and training. The headteacher has received support to enable her to reorganise the school and set up new management structures. Although this was a necessary first step, the impact of this support and restructuring is not yet consistently visible in terms of improved outcomes for pupils.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Cheshire West and Chester. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector