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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Kay Walker
Headteacher
Whaley Thorns Primary School
Portland Road
Langwith
Mansfield
Nottinghamshire
NG20 9HB

Dear Miss Walker

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Whaley Thorns Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 25 November 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 second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in October 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 visit, meetings were held with you, two subject leaders, the chair of the governing body and a group of pupils, to discuss the actions taken since the last monitoring inspection. I held a telephone conversation with a representative of the local authority. I evaluated your plans for improvement. We conducted a tour of the school together and visited all classes to see pupils and staff at work.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, one teacher has left the school. A temporary supply teacher has been appointed for one year.

Main findings

Since my first monitoring inspection in June, you have revised the school improvement plan. It is now more sharply focused on those areas most in need of improvement. It provides a clear, strategic overview about what actions will take place to bring about change. It identifies measurable success criteria and interim milestones, which are helping governors to check progress regularly and with increased challenge. This has been key to ensuring that improvements are now taking place at a steady pace.

You and the deputy headteacher have taken swift and effective action to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This has been your main focus since my last visit. You have made your expectations very clear to teachers, teaching assistants and pupils. You are implementing a comprehensive programme of training and development for teachers. For example, teachers have visited other schools to observe good practice. Teachers are setting higher expectations of what pupils can achieve and planning more interesting learning activities. You are ensuring that teaching is beginning to focus more effectively on the needs of pupils of different abilities, including the most able. As a result, pupils are beginning to make better progress. However, you recognise that many of these changes are at an early stage of implementation and that teaching is not yet consistently good across the school. We agreed that you need to continue to provide good-quality professional development to ensure better outcomes for all groups of pupils.

Your regular monitoring of teaching and learning now includes daily visits to all classes. This is providing you and the deputy headteacher with a very clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching across the school. Consequently, the support you are providing for teachers is much more closely focused on their individual needs.

You have reviewed the roles of teaching assistants throughout the school. They welcome the recently introduced weekly meetings where they can share good practice and undertake training to develop their skills. As a result, they are becoming clearer about their roles, developing confidence to undertake responsibilities and supporting the progress of individuals or groups of pupils more effectively.

The early years leader is highly committed to continually and successfully improving the provision and ensuring that children are given the very best start to their education. The environment provides children with a wealth of opportunities indoors and outside which excite and capture their curiosity. All adults are becoming increasingly skilful at assessing what the children can already do and planning focused activities to address any gaps in their learning. As a result, children are becoming mature and independent learners who enjoy exploring, investigating and sharing their learning.

Subject leaders' skills remain underdeveloped. You recognise that the responsibility for improving teaching and learning is not yet widely enough distributed across subject leadership. The role of subject leaders needs to be developed further to enable the school to make more rapid progress and to ensure that all leaders are successfully fulfilling their roles.

Attendance is improving and is now closer to the national average. This is evidence of the successful work of the deputy headteacher with parents and carers in helping them to understand the negative impact that regular absence can have on pupils' learning and progress. Pupils are highly motivated by the range of rewards that they receive for regular attendance and are fiercely competitive to achieve the reward for 100% attendance.

The governing body has been reconstituted. Governors are increasing their level of challenge and ensuring that you and the deputy headteacher are focusing sharply on improving teaching, learning and assessment. They are strengthening their monitoring arrangements to check on the school's work more effectively. Consequently, they are becoming more informed about how well the school is doing.

The school's arrangements for safeguarding pupils meet current requirements. Pupils who I met reported that they are happy in school and feel safe.

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, in collaboration with Synergy Teaching School Alliance, has increased its level of support to the school since my last monitoring inspection. This has included training, monitoring the quality of teaching and learning and providing support for individual teachers or groups of staff. As a result, the school is beginning to progress more quickly.

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

Yours sincerely

Dorothy Bathgate
Her Majesty's Inspector