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Natalie Maughan
Acting headteacher
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Dear Mrs Maughan

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Silver Tree Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 17 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 first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in January 2016. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

At its section 5 inspection before the one that took place in January 2016, the school was also judged to require improvement.

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:

- work in partnership with the on-site pre-school provision to ensure that children are ready to make rapid progress on entry to the Reception class
- improve pupils' letter formation and handwriting, especially in key stage 1
- ensure that assessment information presented to governors half termly includes all groups of pupils, such as the most able disadvantaged pupils
- strengthen the quality of school improvement planning by including deadlines

by which the outcomes will have been achieved for each priority and how precisely success will be measured.

Evidence

During the inspection, discussions were held with you, the consultant headteacher, other senior leaders, subject leaders, pupils, the governing body and two representatives of the local authority. The school action plans and other documents were evaluated. You accompanied me on a learning walk around the school to look at teaching and learning in classes, together with the progress and standards in pupils' books. You, the consultant headteacher and I carried out a scrutiny of pupils' workbooks. We compared the progress made by the most able pupils during the autumn term of the 2015/16 academic year with the progress made by the most able pupils during the autumn term of the current academic year. I also checked the school's single central record and recruitment processes in respect of staff new to the school since the previous inspection. I took account of 37 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View.

Context

The deputy headteacher left the school at the end of the spring term. The subject leader for mathematics acted as deputy headteacher and acting headteacher during the summer term. A higher-level teaching assistant left the school in September.

You joined the school as the new deputy headteacher at the beginning of the autumn term. Since September, you have acted as headteacher during the substantive headteacher's absence. A consultant headteacher from Neville's Cross Primary School recently began supporting you in school for three days each week. A newly qualified teacher joined the school in September.

New leaders for the early years, special educational needs and/or disabilities and English were appointed at the beginning of September from within the school.

The vice-chair of the governing body resigned and was replaced by an existing governor. Two new governors have been appointed.

The school roll has increased from 178 to 182.

Main findings

Significant turbulence in leadership initially slowed the school improvement process. However, your appointment as the new deputy headteacher (and now the acting headteacher) has brought about a 'sea change' in the school's fortunes.

The school action plan has been rewritten. All of the actions required to secure improvement are now made clear. However, governors require more information to be included so that they can challenge the impact of leaders' work robustly. They want to see deadlines by which outcomes will be achieved and targets they can measure to show how successful each action has been in driving improvement.

The performance management policy has been updated. Leaders have reviewed teachers' performance and agreed new targets for the current academic year. All teachers now have individual targets relevant to them. Teachers' training needs have been identified and a date for checking their progress against the targets half way through the year agreed.

You have introduced new systems and procedures to track the achievement of pupils in reading, writing and mathematics. Governors regularly receive a succinct summary of assessment information. They are able to evaluate and challenge the progress made by whole cohorts and most groups of pupils. Teachers have worked with colleagues from other schools and the local authority to validate the accuracy of assessment data.

During the inspection, leaders compared the progress made by the most able Year 6 pupils in writing this year with the progress made by the most able Year 6 pupils at the same time in 2015. The current Year 6 pupils are more productive. They write more because they are developing a stamina for writing. Their writing includes more sophisticated vocabulary choices and a greater range of sentence structures. They are making better progress.

However, pupils in key stage 1 have under-developed letter formation and handwriting. The vast majority of children attend the pre-school (which is attached to the school) before starting in the Reception class. Leaders have not established a close enough working relationship with this provision to ensure that children are ready to make rapid progress, especially in phonics and early letter formation.

There was a significant change in subject leadership at the beginning of the autumn term. New leaders have accessed support from the local authority and from subject leader colleagues in other schools, such as King Street Primary School. Although at an embryonic stage, subject leadership is developing. Leaders have established a baseline for their subject, audited resources and checked on the quality of pupils' work. All have a thorough action plan for further development and are keen to make their mark.

You lead by example and have very high expectations of the pupils and the staff. You have forged very effective links with the parents by improving communication between school and home. Parents feel welcome in school and are really buying into school life. They enjoy attending the poetry recitals and assemblies which now feature regularly in the school's annual calendar of events.

The status of reading, and pupils' interest in reading, have risen in the school as a result of a number of exciting initiatives. The mobile library now pays fortnightly visits to the school. Parents and children take part in regular book, comic and magazine exchanges. Pupils enjoy reading in the newly created reading hub at lunchtimes. Both teachers and pupils thoroughly enjoyed a 'Reading Rocks' day in school.

Teachers' skills are developing in line with the high-quality training they access. Their questioning is improving, as is their ability to explain concepts clearly. Their ability to assess pupils' attainment and progress is improving because of the whole-school assessment systems and procedures. The key stage 2 pupils really value their reading, writing and mathematics target cards. They like it when a target is highlighted as complete and really appreciate knowing the rest of the targets for their year group. One said he liked to have a 'sneaky peek' to prepare for what is coming up next.

Pupils' achievements are evaluated by leaders and teachers at regular pupil progress meetings. Their progress is assessed. Teachers identify intervention activities for pupils who are not making sufficient progress. These pupils receive one-to-one or small-group interventions, on a daily basis over a short term. Although this is a relatively new initiative, pupils' progress appears to be quickening.

A new coordinator for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SENCo) took up post in September. She has commenced her studies in respect of the national award for special educational needs coordination. In addition, she has worked with the local authority to ensure that pupils' needs are identified correctly and that the provision made for them is appropriate.

Governors understand that they did not challenge the headteacher and senior leaders effectively prior to the last inspection. Their committee structures are much improved. Each committee now has a named chair and a named minute taker. Governors now receive their papers at least one week in advance of meetings. They are able to read and digest their contents before attending. Recent minutes of meetings show increased challenge from governors, but there is still some way to go. Governors told the inspector that they are pleased 'to have a voice'.

External support

The local authority has responded robustly to the outcome of the previous inspection and the turbulence of staffing at senior leadership level. A school strategy group was convened almost immediately and has met regularly since the inspection. Concerns about the rates of progress were identified during a local authority review of the school which took place in June. As a result, the local authority arranged for you to spend two days a week at Silver Tree before you formally took up post in September. Your existing knowledge of the school was a great asset when you were appointed as acting headteacher in mid-September.

The local authority has also supported the development of subject leaders through coaching and mentoring. The early years environment, although not yet finished, is much improved following the input of the local authority's consultant teachers.

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

Yours sincerely

Belita Scott
Her Majesty's Inspector