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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 4234
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Chris Peacock
Headteacher
Holy Family RC Primary School
Prior Street
Darlington
County Durham
DL3 9EN

Dear Mr Peacock

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Holy Family RC Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 18 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 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders, governors and the trust are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The school should take further action to:

- review the strategy for teaching spelling and use the information to make rapid improvements to pupils' spelling
- ensure that governors' and leaders' improvement planning identifies precisely what success will look like and how it will be measured
- make sure that the most able pupils have consistently challenging work so that it matches the most effective practice in the school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you and other senior leaders. I also met with the chief executive officer of the Carmel Education Trust, governors, middle leaders and

the supporting headteacher to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school improvement plan and scrutinised other documents, including governing body minutes and the school's records of learning observations. Accompanied by you, I made a series of brief lesson visits in which I spoke to pupils and looked at their work and I spent some time with pupils on the playground during lunchtime.

Context

Since the previous inspection, four teachers, including the deputy headteacher, have left the school. There has been a significant period of staff absence during which several supply teachers were employed. Since September the new deputy headteacher has taken up her post and a mathematics lead teacher has been seconded from a local school. One class is currently being taught by a long-term supply teacher.

Main findings

Leaders got off to a slow start in acting on the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection. This was because they were dealing with staffing issues and contending with significant staff absence. These difficulties have now largely been resolved with strong appointments, and improvements are beginning to gain some momentum.

You and the governors are candid about how monitoring and holding staff accountable has lacked rigour in the past. However, after the initial slow start, you and other leaders are beginning to put in place the foundations for improvement. Work has begun to improve pupils' writing skills. Pupils are gaining resilience in their writing and they can use interesting vocabulary and write extended pieces. A new approach to reading is showing early signs of success. For example, pupils are becoming adept at spotting how devices such as personification and scene-setting are tackled in a text and then applying it to their own writing.

Teachers now have a consistent approach to giving pupils feedback about what they have done well and what they need to do next to improve their work. Pupils consistently have a short opportunity to have a go at putting their teachers' advice into practice when they get their work back. In some cases, teachers also make sure that subsequent lessons build in further opportunities to really nail down those improvements so that they are firmly embedded. However, this is not consistent. Teachers and pupils understand the new assessment system. In-school and external moderation is resulting in the system becoming more reliable.

Pupils' work in mathematics is also showing early signs of improvement. Teachers are generally giving most-able pupils extra challenge and asking questions that probe pupils' understanding and get them to think hard about knotty problems. For example, in Year 5 the most able pupils imagined themselves presenting

mathematical evidence to a jury to prove which numbers were prime numbers. However, this is not consistently successful and there are examples when questions are too easy and challenges are not particularly challenging.

Work to improve the work of teaching assistants is under way, including training and leaders observing teaching assistants' work with pupils. However, it is too soon to evaluate how successful this has been.

Pupils continue to behave well. They are kind and sociable and they were keen to chat to me about school life. They told me that you and your staff make time for them to discuss tricky subjects and that they feel safe to do so. They were also confident in telling me about the different types of bullying and reassuring me that when anything unpleasant does occur they have faith in any adult in the school to deal with it on their behalf.

You arranged for a review of the use of the pupil premium funding and this was completed in April. You accept that you and the governors were too slow to act on the recommendations of this review. However, a new strategy has now been agreed which includes identifying any particular difficulties faced by individual children. You and your senior team realise the importance of using this funding for all pupils eligible for the funding, including those who are most-able and disadvantaged.

The school's improvement plan is focused on the correct priorities but you accept that in its current form it is weak and will not help you, other leaders and governors in your pursuit of improvement. The plan tends to outline tasks that are to be done and then check that those tasks have been completed. This approach results in actions being taken by leaders without a clear view of how it will improve pupils' outcomes. Subsequently, it is then difficult for you, the governors and the trust to check if actions have been effective. For example, one objective is to give time to pupils to improve their spellings. Leaders' subsequent check concluded that time had indeed been included in the timetable for spelling practice. However, we both noted in pupils' books that pupils' spellings are not improving and the strategy of asking pupils to write out a spelling three times is not working for some pupils.

Governors have a sound grasp of the school's strengths and weaknesses. They were able to discuss the most recent results with me and correctly identified groups of pupils who had not done as well as others, such as disadvantaged pupils and most-able pupils, and the disappointing progress that pupils are making in writing. Governors are acutely aware that while the recent results were a legacy from previously weak teaching, they must make sure that the momentum of recent improvements is sustained. Minutes of the governing body meetings demonstrate that governors are offering a sharp challenge, for example in questioning the ambition of pupils' targets.

External support

The trust is offering the school effective support, particularly in helping you deal with staffing issues. You have found the support of improvement partners and a headteacher from a local school very helpful. You have benefited from observing these professionals giving effective feedback to teachers and this is helping you and other leaders improve your practice. The work with improvement partners is also helping middle leaders to build an accurate picture of pupils' progress. They are becoming increasingly confident in spotting when pupils are not making enough progress and planning how they can help them catch up quickly.

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

Yours sincerely

Joan Hewitt
Senior Her Majesty's Inspector