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Mr Michael Unsworth
Headteacher
St John's Roman Catholic Primary School
Ann Street
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Lancashire
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Dear Mr Unsworth

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St John's Roman Catholic Primary School, Rochdale

Following my visit to your school on 16 September 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report my 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.

This visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 2014. 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. The school should take further action to:

- ensure that teachers collect a range of evidence to demonstrate the impact on pupils' learning of problem solving and investigations in mathematics.
- make sure that when teachers mark books their comments about how the work can be improved are incisive, giving pupils clear guidance on what they need to do to make the work even better and so accelerate their progress.
- sharpen the success criteria in the school development plan so that leaders and managers are able to clearly see the impact of the actions being taken to improve the school. In addition fine-tune the plan so that it includes milestones, enabling senior leaders and governors to gauge the progress being made against each of the targets.

Evidence

During my visit, meetings were held with you and other members of the senior management team including the colleague who has particular responsibility for coordinating the school's special educational needs provision. I also held meetings with the Chair of the Governing Body, the local authority school improvement officer, three teaching assistants and a charming group of well mannered, polite and articulate Year 6 pupils. All these meetings enabled me to determine the actions you and your colleagues are taking to improve the school since the most recent inspection. I also examined the school improvement plan, senior leaders' evaluation of how well the school is doing and the work in a sample of books from pupils in Year 6. I scrutinised the school's record of the checks made on the suitability of adults to work with children; to satisfy myself that the new staff are included. You also accompanied me on a tour of the school when I took the opportunity to introduce myself to the staff and see the pupils at work.

Context

There have been a number of changes since inspectors previously visited the school. The headteacher, at the time of the inspection, has retired and you took your post at the start of this academic year. In September three teachers joined the staff. The school is currently working with the Department for Education in relation to the school's systems for the administration of examinations.

Main findings

In the meetings I held with key stakeholders there was unanimous agreement that the judgement of inspectors at the most recent inspection was the right one for the school, providing a firm foundation on which to base further improvements.

The school presents as a bright and attractive place to learn with eye catching wall displays. You have insisted that all classrooms have 'learning walls' in order to support pupils in their learning. However, this is a relatively new initiative and it is too early to determine its impact.

As was the case when inspectors previously visited the school, the pupils' behaviour is good. In every classroom I visited I found pupils who were attentive, engaged and on task; clearly demonstrating positive attitudes to learning.

Since your appointment you have tightened systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school. Subject leaders are being given greater responsibility for the quality of classroom practice and the standards the pupils achieve. In order to improve the effectiveness of the team of teaching assistants, both they and their classroom teacher colleagues have undergone training, led by the local authority, to improve their skills to support pupils with specific learning needs. With the support

of the Chair of the Governing Body, the special educational needs coordinator has re-written the school's special educational needs policy to clarify teachers' professional practice in relation to this group of pupils and raise expectations of what these pupils can achieve. However, it is early days and the full impact of these new ways of working have yet to be felt. Nevertheless, your colleagues and members of the governing body commented, that in the short time since your appointment, you have brought renewed vigour and purpose to the work of the school.

The Year 6 pupils I spoke with reported that the teaching of mathematics is better this year. They commented that they enjoy the challenge of the activities they are given to do and are able to apply what they have learned to solve problems and carry out investigations. However, notwithstanding that it is still early in the term, there is little evidence of this type of work in pupils' books. This lack of tangible evidence will make it difficult for the subject leader to evaluate the impact of this aspect of teaching and learning in mathematics.

The scrutiny of pupils' mathematics books reveals that work is marked regularly, with pupils receiving regular feedback on how well they are doing. However, some teachers' comments about how the work could be improved are not incisive enough. They do not give pupils clear and precise information about how the work could be made better. Accordingly, opportunities for maximising the impact of marking on pupils' progress are missed.

Senior leaders have appropriately re-written the school development plan in the light of the findings of the previous inspection. It has a clear structure with priorities for development allied to the areas for improvement in the inspection report. It is a working document being used by senior leaders to focus their work in bringing about rapid improvement. However, some of the success criteria, by which governors can measure the efficacy of the plan, are not sharp enough. For example, there are no outcomes targets for the different groups of pupils in the school. As a result, it is difficult for senior leaders and governors to determine the impact that actions being taken to improve the school are having on achievement. In addition, the plan would benefit from the inclusion of suitable milestones to enable governors to gauge the progress that senior leaders are making against each of the improvement priorities.

The external review of governance, recommended by the inspection team, is in hand and the first meeting is imminent. However, the governors have not been slow to respond to the inspection findings. The governing body is now a member of the National Governors' Association, providing them with a support network and access to good practice. They demonstrated their strength and resolution during the headteacher appointment process re-advertising the post several times until they were convinced they had the most suitable candidate.

During my visit we agreed that I would return to the school and lead training sessions in relation to improving governance and monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning.

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 is providing senior leaders and governors with effective support, helping them deliver the priorities in the school development plan. Along with the Diocese, the local authority has brokered a link with a local successful Catholic primary school to enable you and your colleagues to share good practice.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Rochdale and the Director of Education for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Salford.

Yours sincerely

Charles Lowry

Her Majesty's Inspector