

Serco Inspections
Colmore Plaza
20 Colmore Circus
Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 0121 679 9146
Direct email: clare.benson@serco.com



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Claire Gaskin
Acting Executive headteacher
St Mary's Bluecoat CofE (VA) Primary School
Lodge Lane
The Grove
Bridgnorth
WV15 5EQ

Dear Mrs Gaskin

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to St Mary's Bluecoat CofE (VA) Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 26 January 2015, 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 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. At its previous section 5 inspection 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. The school should take further action to:

- ensure that appropriate reading books are provided for pupils who are learning to read so that they can practise their developing understanding of phonics (the sounds that letters make)
- explain in the school action plan how the success of each aspect of the plan will be evaluated and clarify the role of governors, the local authority and diocese in this work.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with you as the acting executive headteacher and with three governors and a representative of the diocese. Information was received from the local authority about the action taken since the

last inspection. Brief visits were made to classrooms and several documents were considered including samples of records from the checks that leaders make on the quality of teaching and pupils' progress. The school action plan was evaluated.

Context

The substantive headteacher has been absent due to ill health since the spring term. You were appointed as acting executive headteacher in September 2014 when St Mary's Bluecoat formed a federation with Worfield Endowed CofE Primary School. Since the section 5 inspection one teacher has taken maternity leave and her class is being taught by a temporary teacher.

Main findings

You are providing strong and effective leadership and have already raised expectations about what can be achieved at St Mary's Bluecoat. Your action plan covers all of the areas for improvement identified during the section 5 inspection and sets out in clear, logical steps what the school must do in order to be judged as good at the next inspection. You have described how you will check that each action is being implemented and identified how improvement will be measured. However, you have not fully explained the role of governors, the local authority and the diocese in evaluating the overall success of the planned improvements.

Leaders are making regular checks on the work of teachers by visiting lessons and looking at the work in pupils' books. Following these checks you are providing clear and helpful feedback to teachers so that they know what they are doing well and what they need to improve.

You are also meeting with teachers each half term to discuss the progress of pupils in their class. You keep careful records of these meetings which identify those pupils who are not doing as well as they could be and set out agreed changes to teaching strategies and support programmes in order to accelerate pupils' progress. However, these meetings and the subsequent planned actions do not always focus enough on the progress of different groups such as girls and boys or disadvantaged pupils and other pupils.

You have clarified expectations for teachers' performance in line with the Teacher Standards. Leaders have set targets for every teacher that are clearly linked to these standards and to school improvement priorities. When underperformance has been identified, you have put in place a planned package of support and challenge to help teachers improve.

All staff are being provided with regular training and development activities which are rightly focused on improving teaching in order to raise pupils' achievement. For example, staff meetings have included training on the use of questioning to check and deepen understanding and on effective marking which helps pupils move on in

their learning. You are also making use of good and outstanding practice within the federation so that teachers have increased opportunities to learn from the effective planning, teaching and assessment of colleagues.

You have recognised that not all teachers have the necessary subject knowledge to effectively teach some aspects of the curriculum, such as calculation, phonics (the sounds that letters make) and spelling, grammar and punctuation. Leaders have provided training and individual support for teachers to help them develop their skills in teaching these important aspects of English and mathematics. Your observations indicate that this is beginning to lead to improvements in teaching in some classes.

Reading has been given a much higher profile in the school. The library has been refurbished and pupils have regular opportunities to visit it and to read and borrow books. You have ensured that all teachers read to their class each day and promote good quality books through displays around the school. Pupils are also encouraged to read regularly at home and parents have been provided with helpful guidance to help them support this.

Although there are now more opportunities for pupils to read in school, many of the books provided for pupils who are learning to read are not appropriate because they do not allow pupils to practise the phonic skills that they are learning in reading lessons.

Leaders and staff are helping pupils develop a more determined and resilient approach to their learning. This is helping pupils to be more willing to persevere when they find something difficult or make a mistake.

Teachers have worked hard to ensure that their classrooms are welcoming and attractive. Displays are used to support learning as well as to celebrate children's work. Some parts of the school have been refurbished and are bright and welcoming. However, in other parts of the school the decor is 'tired' and would benefit from some improvement. The outdoor area in the Early Years Foundation Stage also requires further development to make it into a more interesting and useful learning space.

The Governing Body have a realistic view of the school's current position and of the priorities for improvement. They understand that the most pressing need is to improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better so that all pupils achieve well. Following an audit of their skills, governors have organised training to help them become more knowledgeable and skilled.

Minutes from meetings of the Governing Body show that they are beginning to ask questions to hold leaders to account. Governors recognise that their skills in evaluating the impact of leaders' actions would benefit from further development. Governors also acknowledge that they need to ensure that there is an appropriate balance between providing challenge and allowing the acting executive headteacher

to get on with the day to day running of the school. This is particularly important for those governors who are involved in the school in different capacities. Governors are meeting very soon to work with a consultant who will help them clarify their roles and responsibilities.

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 good support to this school. The school improvement advisor (SIA) visits the school regularly and has an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Since the section 5 inspection in September the SIA has supported the headteacher in ensuring that appropriate performance management processes are in place so that teachers can be held to account for their work. The SIA has checked that the acting executive headteacher's judgements about pupils' progress and the quality of teaching are secure. She has also ensured that the school's action plans cover the most pressing priorities for school improvement. In addition, the local authority has supported the school in managing the changes arising from becoming part of a federation. The local authority is confident that the acting executive headteacher is providing effective leadership to the school and consequently has re-categorised the school as requiring medium rather than high levels of support.

The diocese has provided good support for the acting executive headteacher, particularly with regard to establishing and developing a single governing body for the federation.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Shropshire.

Yours sincerely

Morag Kophamel
Her Majesty's Inspector