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Joanne Owen
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Dear Mrs Owen

Additional, remote monitoring inspection of Banks St Stephen's CofE School

Following my remote inspection with Tim Vaughan, Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI), of your school on 18 March 2021, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions that have been taken to provide education to all pupils during the current circumstances.

This monitoring inspection was conducted under section 8 (2) of the Education Act 2005 (as amended) and in accordance with Ofsted's published procedures for visiting schools while routine inspections remain temporarily suspended. It was additional to the usual monitoring process for schools that are judged to require improvement.

This monitoring inspection was carried out remotely. As such, the range of evidence available to inspectors was narrower than would normally be the case during an on-site inspection. As a result, this letter provides a more limited level of assurance than our usual monitoring reports.

The inspection took place because the school has received a judgement of requires improvement. The school's most recent section 5 inspection took place in April 2018.

Having considered all the evidence and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on the school, I am of the opinion that at this time:

Leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances.

Leaders and those responsible for governance should take further action to:

- ensure that subject leaders use the information about children's learning in the early years as a firmer foundation for the curriculum in Year 1.

Context

- You were appointed as headteacher in September 2019. One member of staff has left the school and a new teacher has taken up post. Three governors have left the governing body and one new governor has been appointed.
- When the school was closed to most pupils at the start of the spring term 2021, over half of all pupils were educated at home. Half of all pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and one third of those pupils identified as vulnerable, attended school.
- At the time of this inspection, almost all pupils were attending school. A very small proportion of pupils were self-isolating.

Main findings

- You, other leaders, and governors have taken the necessary steps to ensure that pupils' learning has continued uninterrupted during the current challenging times. You have acted swiftly to increase the support for pupils' well-being. This is to help them overcome any difficulties that they may have faced upon their return to school. Staff are dedicating more time to activities that support pupils' mental health and readiness for learning. This is to assist them in settling back into school routines quickly.
- Subject leaders were making positive changes to curriculum planning prior to the pandemic. You have not allowed the impact of COVID-19 to slow down this work. Subject leaders have received effective training. This has enabled them to produce clear plans that identify how subject content is organised, so that pupils can build on their prior knowledge. However, some subject leaders have not thought carefully enough about the knowledge that children gain by the end of the Reception Year. This hinders a smooth transition in children's learning as they move into Year 1.
- You and subject leaders have been able to identify which aspects of the curriculum have not been taught or have not been remembered due to the impact of the pandemic. The current curriculum has been carefully adapted to make up for any learning that could not take place when pupils were being educated at home. Teachers are making every effort to deliver the adapted existing curriculum so that pupils can get back on track.

- Teachers' swift checks on pupils' reading abilities have provided a clear overview of the phonic knowledge that younger pupils, and those at the early stages of reading in key stage 2, have learned and remembered. Additional phonics sessions are in place to support those pupils who have to cover lost ground. Pupils continue to read books that closely match the sounds that they know. Older pupils are regaining their skills in grammar and comprehension through focused teaching sessions. The daily story sessions continue to promote pupils' love of reading.
- All pupils identified as vulnerable have now returned to school. Teachers keep a close check on these pupils. They are well supported in their learning with small group work sessions. Vulnerable pupils can access members of the pastoral team who regularly make additional checks on their welfare. These actions have helped support those vulnerable pupils who have so far struggled to fully settle back into school life.
- Teachers have a secure understanding of how to adapt tasks and use a range of resources to effectively support those pupils with SEND. The special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) has ensured that pupils' individual learning plans were reviewed with parents and carers during the pandemic. Leaders work closely with other agencies, such as speech and language services, to ensure that pupils with SEND can access specialist help where required.
- Governors want the best for all pupils. They have a detailed knowledge of the curriculum offer. Leaders and staff are grateful of the support that governors provide. This has had a positive impact in terms of curriculum development. Governors take the time to regularly check on the well-being of you and other staff.
- You and leaders at all levels benefit from the effective support of the local authority. Subject leaders have all received training that is improving the curriculum offered to pupils. Due to the useful training that they have received, governors are now able to hold leaders more effectively to account for their work.

Evidence

This inspection was conducted remotely. We spoke to you, other senior leaders, pupils, staff, representatives of those responsible for governance and a representative of the local authority, to discuss leaders' actions to provide education to all pupils during a national lockdown.

We also reviewed documents relating to the school's curriculum. We listened to pupils read and talked with a group of pupils from key stage 2 about their experiences of school. We looked at 40 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire, Parent View, including 27 free-text responses, and 17 staff questionnaires.

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

Yours sincerely

John Tomlinson
Her Majesty's Inspector