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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Laura Peckson
Headteacher
Darwen St James CofE Primary Academy
St James Crescent
Darwen
Lancashire
BB3 0EY

Dear Miss Peckson

Special measures monitoring inspection of Darwen St James CofE Primary Academy

This letter sets out the findings from the monitoring inspection that took place on 24 and 25 April 2024, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. The monitoring inspection was carried out under section 8(2) of the Education Act 2005 and was the first monitoring inspection since the school was judged to require special measures following the graded (section 5) inspection that took place in February 2023.

The purpose of a monitoring inspection is not to grade the school's overall effectiveness, but to identify and report on the school's progress. It is to highlight to the school and parents any improvements that school leaders have made since the school's previous graded inspection.

During the inspection, I discussed with you and other leaders, members of the local governing committee, members of the board of trustees and the chief executive officer (CEO) the actions that have been taken to improve the school since the most recent graded inspection. We discussed the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also visited lessons, talked to pupils, reviewed pupils' work and considered a range of school documentation, including the school improvement plan. I also talked with subject leaders, members of staff, parents and carers and representatives of the local authority. I have considered all of this information in coming to my judgement.

Leaders have made progress to improve the school, but more work is necessary for the school to be no longer judged as requiring special measures.

I strongly recommend that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

Since the previous inspection in February 2023, the senior leadership team has been restructured. A deputy headteacher has been seconded to the school and an early years leader has been appointed. The school is currently finalising the recruitment of a substantive deputy headteacher and an additional senior leader. There have also been a number of new teaching and support staff appointments, some of which have been temporary. A new chair of the local governing committee has been appointed and there have been a number of further changes to the membership of this committee.

During this monitoring inspection, I focused on those aspects of the school identified as most needing improvement when the school was last inspected. This included leadership at all levels, including governance, and the quality of the curriculum, including for children in the early years and pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

The school has taken effective action to tackle the significant weaknesses identified at the previous inspection. It has worked closely with the trust to develop a clear vision for the quality of education provided for its pupils. There has been a focus on securing a firm foundation on which to build further improvements. Despite the significant changes that the school has had to make, staff morale is high. They value the school's consideration of their workload and well-being. Staff are positive about the changes which have been made. They are committed to the journey of improvement that the school has embarked upon.

The quality of education that pupils are receiving is improving. Staff's expectations have been raised. Much work has been done to design a curriculum that matches the ambition of the national curriculum. The curriculum now sets out what pupils will learn and when they will be taught this content. This means that pupils' learning is carefully ordered to enable them to build on what they know. That said, the school is at the early stages of making it clear exactly what pupils should know and understand to provide a firm foundation for their later learning. At times, this leads to teachers focusing on activities rather than designing learning that enables pupils to secure key knowledge. This also means that teachers are unsure of how to check what pupils have learned so that any misconceptions can be dealt with swiftly.

Improvements to the reading curriculum for older pupils have ensured that these pupils now have regular access to quality and ambitious texts. There is a focus on ensuring pupils who struggle to read are supported to catch up through a suitable programme of support. However, a considerable number of pupils have gaps in their reading knowledge due to weaknesses in the previous reading curriculum. Currently, staff do not deliver the revised reading curriculum consistently well in order to ensure that pupils are effectively supported to become accurate and fluent readers.

Where improvements to the curriculum are more established, pupils are increasingly better supported to develop their subject knowledge. This is evident in mathematics, where improvements to the delivery of the mathematics programme are beginning to bear fruit. However, the impact of recent improvements is variable across the curriculum.

Pupils' experience of learning across the school and across subjects is uneven. This is due, to some degree, to the instability and changes in staffing. The school has prioritised addressing these instabilities and steadying the ship. That said, pupils' achievement remains weak. The legacy of a weak curriculum means that many pupils have large gaps in their basic skills, such as writing, that prevent them from being prepared for the next stage of their education.

The school has sought specialist advice and guidance to review and improve the provision for pupils with SEND. For example, the trust has commissioned a SEND audit through the local authority. This has provided clear actions for further improvement. There is a sharper focus on the accurate and timely identification and assessment of the needs of these pupils. Training for staff has focused on how to meet the different needs of pupils with SEND. While there are some signs that this work has begun to pay dividends, these improvements are at a very early stage. Adaptations to the delivery of the curriculum for pupils with SEND are not typically well considered. Pupils with SEND invariably rely on additional adults to support them to access their learning. This hinders pupils' independence and, occasionally, prevents them from benefiting from the same curriculum as their peers.

The school has begun to improve the provision for children in the early years. Much of this work has been focused on securing cohesion across the early years classes. There is no longer a disconnect between the curriculum on offer in the two-year-old and Nursery class and the learning programmes in the Reception class. The school is currently further refining this work to ensure that the important content of the curriculum is built on in each phase to best support children to gain the knowledge that they need to succeed in their future learning.

Since the previous inspection, the school has identified behaviour as a further area to improve. They have taken swift action to address inconsistencies in how pupils' behaviour is managed. Work to further strengthen policies and approaches to support pupils' behaviour across the school has been effective. Staff and pupils state that behaviour has improved as a result of this more consistent approach. Typically, pupils behave well in classrooms and around the school. They work hard and demonstrate kindness and manners to peers and adults alike.

Leadership capacity is improving. Subject leaders are beginning to grow into their roles. They value the support and guidance that they are receiving to develop their skills and knowledge. However, this work is in its infancy. These leaders are currently heavily reliant on support to lead improvements in the design and delivery of their subject curriculums.

The school has used the support from the trust wisely to target the areas that need most improvement. For example, through work with experienced SEND and early years leaders. The trust has also brokered external support from the local authority to work with the school to provide appropriate training and curriculum development support.

Governance is stronger than it has been previously. Members of the local governing committee have undergone a range of training. This, alongside the support from the trust, is helping governors to have a clearer understanding of their role. They are better placed to offer appropriate challenge and support. Together with members of the trust board, they are keeping a close eye on the school's improvement journey and progress.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the board of trustees and the CEO of the Cidari Education Limited multi-academy trust, the director of education for the Diocese of Blackburn, the Department for Education's regional director and the director of children's services for Blackburn with Darwen. This letter will be published on the Ofsted reports website.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Jewitt
His Majesty's Inspector