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27 November 2024

Laura Peckson
Headteacher
Darwen St James CofE Primary Academy
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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 5 and 6 November 2024, on behalf of His Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI) 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 second 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 key and (where applicable) provision judgements, 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, Gaynor Rennie, Ofsted Inspector, and 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. We visited lessons, talked to pupils, reviewed pupils' work, and considered a range of school documentation, including the school improvement plan. We 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 no longer be judged as requiring special measures.

HMCI strongly recommends that the school does not seek to appoint early career teachers.

The position regarding the appointment of early career teachers will be considered again during any monitoring inspection we carry out.

The progress made towards the removal of special measures

This monitoring inspection focused on those aspects of the school identified as most needing improvement when the school was last inspected. This included the quality of education provided for pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and leadership at all levels. Since the previous inspection, there have been further changes to staffing. For example, a substantive deputy headteacher has been appointed. Several staff have left the school and new teaching staff have been appointed.

The school has improved some aspects of the curriculum. In the early years, careful thought has been given to the most important knowledge children need to be taught. This starts from the provision for two-year-olds and is built on in each phase to prepare children for the challenges of key stage 1. This means that children in the early years now benefit from increasingly effective learning opportunities matched to their needs.

Decisive action has been taken to strengthen the teaching of writing across the school. Teachers have received focused training and support. Consequently, teachers now have the subject knowledge that they need to deliver the writing curriculum confidently. However, many older pupils have wide gaps in their knowledge that have not been identified or addressed well enough. This hinders their ability to learn successfully. This, combined with a legacy of a weak curriculum, means that pupils are unable to take full advantage of the improved writing curriculum offer. These pupils have a considerable amount of ground to cover to ensure that they are ready for the next stage of their education.

The mathematics curriculum is well established. This is helping pupils to build their mathematical knowledge securely over time. A focus on basic skills, especially in the early years, means that younger children are better prepared for future learning than has been the case in the past. Nevertheless, as with writing, gaps in pupils' mathematical knowledge in key stage 1 and key stage 2 are not consistently identified or addressed. This means that pupils do not build their knowledge as well as they could. The school is trialling a new approach to assessing pupils' learning. However, this is in its infancy. It is too soon to see the impact of this work.

The teaching of reading is becoming more effective. Staff have recently been trained in the school's phonics programme. This training is largely reflected in the support pupils, including for those who struggle to read, receive. For example, pupils are exposed to some of the more challenging words in texts before they begin to read new books. Reading books are matched to the sounds that pupils know. Increasingly, pupils are

supported to become accurate and fluent readers. However, the support given to pupils while they read is inconsistent, and pupils are not provided with sufficient opportunities to practise their reading fluency.

Members of the local governing committee have acted, with strong support from the trust, to gain assurances about the actions that the school is taking to improve. They have increased their understanding of what is happening on the ground. This has been further strengthened by the increasingly challenging questions that they ask.

The school has the trust and confidence of staff, who are keen to play their part in the school's recovery. Morale is high within the staff team, and staff are all working towards a common goal. Significant change is being carefully managed so that staff are not faced with an unmanageable workload. The increased senior leadership capacity has enabled the school to focus on the most pressing issues. The strengthening of leadership beyond this is a work in progress and remains fragile.

With support from the trust, the timely and accurate identification of pupils with SEND has much improved. Greater use is being made of external agencies to make sure that pupils receive the support that they need. However, teachers do not use the information that they have about pupils with SEND to adapt the delivery of the curriculum effectively. This hinders how well pupils with SEND progress through the curriculum. The trust has worked with the school to build further capacity for SEND leadership to address this issue. However, this is at an early stage. In addition, subject leadership is also at an early stage of its development. Progress regarding this has been stalled in part by staffing changes. More remains to be done to develop subject leaders' oversight of how well pupils are learning.

In addition to support received from the trust, the school has embraced the support available from the local authority, particularly to improve the quality of education on offer.

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