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14 January 2011

Mr A Harding
The Headteacher
Birch Hill Primary School
Leppington
Bracknell
Berkshire
RG12 7WW

Dear Mr Harding

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Birch Hill Primary School

Following my visit with Grace Marriott, Additional Inspector, to your school on 12 and 13 January 2011, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in June 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement, which were identified during that inspection, are set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of the governing body and the Director of Children's Services for Bracknell Forest.

Yours sincerely

Chris Nye
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in June 2010

- Raise achievement in English and mathematics and improve the quality of teaching and assessment by:
 - ensuring that teachers have an accurate grasp of expectations for each National Curriculum level
 - developing planning so that it effectively uses pupils' prior achievement to ensure that work set challenges all pupils, including the most able, to achieve their best
 - ensuring that the learning objective for each lesson is specific and clearly explained to pupils
 - making sure that pupils know and understand their targets in English and mathematics and that marking provides pupils with clear guidance on how to improve their work
 - providing pupils with regular opportunities to be involved in evaluating their own learning and that of their peers.

- Ensure leaders and managers at all levels, including the governing body, are effective in driving forward improvements by:
 - ensuring that all pupils' attainment is assessed regularly and the data are used to inform interventions
 - effectively using current data to gain a stronger grasp of pupils' progress, both within subjects and as pupils move through the school
 - improving the quality of monitoring so that there is a sharp focus on measuring the impact of initiatives on pupils' progress.

Special measures: monitoring of Birch Hill Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 12 and 13 January 2011

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including teaching in every classroom. They analysed evidence of pupils' achievement, scrutinised documents, including pupils' work. In addition, they met with the headteacher, senior staff, chair of governors, pupils and local authority representatives. Informal discussions were held with a small number of parents and telephone discussions were held with the chair of the management intervention board and School Improvement Partner.

Context

Since the school was placed in special measures, a new chair of governors has been elected and the organisation of the governing body has been restructured. The local authority has established an independently chaired management intervention board to support the school's leadership. A local authority statement of action and a strategic plan have been drawn up. In September a new teacher and School Improvement Partner took up their posts. The staffing structure and leadership of the school have remained stable.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

The most recent national tests at the end of Key Stage 1 show that, although attainment in mathematics was above average and in reading was average, in writing standards were too low. At the end of Key Stage 2 attainment was around average, but this was below expectations for this cohort, indicating that progress in English and mathematics had been inadequate. Since then, the school has worked hard to improve rates of progress and raise attainment, especially in writing and mathematics. Procedures to systematically assess and track pupils' progress have recently been redesigned and the data collected are starting to appropriately inform planning. As a result, teaching is becoming more focused on pupils' needs and rates of progress are starting to improve. This is swifter in some year groups, for example in Year 2, than in others, but overall satisfactory progress is being made in raising pupils' achievement in writing and mathematics. Pupils achieve well in reading and in speaking and listening. This is because a strong emphasis is placed on developing reading and oral skills and in the way literature is valued throughout the school, for example through the effective use of the school's library. Pupils say that they enjoy their lessons, and older ones in particular feel that recently they are being given more challenging work.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are well supported and consequently make the expected progress relative to their starting points.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils behave well in lessons and around the school. They are polite, treat each other with respect and say that they feel happy in school. They are aware of how to keep themselves safe and healthy. They take their responsibilities seriously, for example a 'buddy' system effectively supports pupils in the playground. Attendance is broadly average, but the school is aware of the need to further tighten up procedures such as routinely following up reasons for unexplained absence on the first day and reporting on attendance to governors.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching observed during the inspection ranged from satisfactory to good, with none that was inadequate. Although this is an improvement, some inconsistencies remain and the school is working diligently to overcome these. The best teaching is well planned, lively, takes good account of pupils' prior learning and has challenging learning targets and activities which are carefully differentiated to meet the needs of all the pupils, including the most able. Some teachers are using very effective questioning techniques to assess the ongoing understanding of pupils and then adjust their teaching accordingly, but this is not sufficiently consistent throughout the school. Learning objectives are now being routinely identified and explained to pupils and linked to clear success criteria. Although occasionally these are not sufficiently challenging, this nevertheless represents good progress since the inspection. Consistent strengths in teaching include the good relationships between adults and pupils, the effective support of teaching assistants and the good management of pupils' behaviour. In weaker lessons the pace of learning is slower, for example because pupils spend too long sitting on the carpet or are given less challenging activities.

Although there have been significant improvements in the way pupils' progress and attainment against National Curriculum levels are assessed, recorded and used to inform planning, the school recognises that this needs further embedding to ensure greater consistency across the school. Inspection evidence suggests that internal systems of moderation indicate that such assessment is broadly accurate, but the school rightly plans to confirm this through external moderation. The marking of pupils' work is detailed and strategies such as 'top tips' are starting to have a positive impact on pupils' understanding of how to improve. Most teachers are identifying well-focused long- and short-term targets, but these are clearer in English than in mathematics. A good start has been made in providing pupils with opportunities to be involved in evaluating their own and others' work, especially in the older classes, and this is helping create a better understanding of what level they are working at and how they can achieve their targets. Such improvements represent positive 'green shoots', but they need time to be securely embedded throughout the school before their full impact on outcomes for pupils can be judged.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- raise achievement in English and mathematics and improve the quality of teaching and assessment by:
 - ensuring that teachers have an accurate grasp of expectations for each National Curriculum level – satisfactory
 - developing planning so that it effectively uses pupils' prior achievement to ensure that work set challenges all pupils, including the most able, to achieve their best – satisfactory
 - ensuring that the learning objective for each lesson is specific and clearly explained to pupils – good
 - making sure that pupils know and understand their targets in English and mathematics and that marking provides pupils with clear guidance on how to improve their work – satisfactory
 - providing pupils with regular opportunities to be involved in evaluating their own learning and that of their peers – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leaders and managers at all levels are becoming much better informed about pupils' achievement and the quality of teaching throughout the school. Under the effective leadership of the headteacher, senior staff are working as a cohesive team to address areas of weakness. For example, they are making good use of the data generated by improved assessment and tracking systems to identify and support underachieving pupils or groups. The monitoring of teaching, planning and pupils' work is now much more systematic and is starting to have a positive impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning. For example, where lesson observations identify a professional development need, suitable training is put in place. Teaching and support staff are well led and demonstrate a determination to improve. Strategic planning has a clear focus on improving outcomes for pupils. The restructured committee system of the governing body, changes in its leadership and the support of the management intervention board is resulting in a more robust approach towards holding the school to account, particularly with regard to raising standards. Although it is too soon to securely judge the impact of such improvements in leadership and management, early indications are that the school is on track to achieve its own challenging targets.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- ensure leaders and managers at all levels, including the governing body, are effective in driving forward improvements by:
 - ensuring that all pupils' attainment is assessed regularly and the data are used to inform interventions - satisfactory
 - effectively using current data to gain a stronger grasp of pupils' progress, both within subjects and as pupils move through the school – satisfactory
 - improving the quality of monitoring so that there is a sharp focus on measuring the impact of initiatives on pupils' progress – satisfactory.

External support

Local authority support is good. This has taken the form of effective advice and guidance provided either by local authority personnel or brokered by them from private providers. Such support has been a significant factor in helping the school to make a promising start in addressing the issues raised by the inspection. The local authority's statement of action is well written, proportionate and is helping to increase the rate of improvement. It fully meets Ofsted's requirements. It links clearly with the school's own strategic plans and sets suitably challenging targets which are timed and relate directly to teaching and learning.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that the school's best practice in assessing pupils' understanding within lessons, so that the pace of learning is more rigorous, is consistently applied across the school.
- Ensure that the effective start that has been made in constructively using assessment data to inform planning and set challenging targets is embedded across the school.