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Miss Alexandra Butler
The Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
Pyle Hill
Newbury
RG14 7SJ

Dear Miss Butler

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Willows Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 8 and 9 February 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is 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 – good.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

Newly Qualified Teachers may be appointed. (This may be to any year group, but there should be no more than two appointments in the first instance.)

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 West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Speed up pupils' progress and hence raise their levels of attainment in all classes by:
 - ensuring teachers understand and articulate what can be expected of pupils, given their accurately evaluated starting points from entering the school, from the start of a school year, or at the start of a topic
 - ensuring that the tasks and activities set for pupils in lessons match their needs and that learning moves at a swift pace.
- Develop further the school's curriculum by:
 - ensuring that provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or difficulties is properly planned, organised and evaluated
 - completing the work started on designing and implementing a curriculum that supports the development of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding across all areas as required, and enables them to enjoy their learning.
- Improve aspects of care, guidance and support by:
 - strengthening the school's effectiveness in enabling pupils to behave well at all times
 - working further to improve pupils' overall attendance and reduce the numbers of pupils who are persistent absentees
 - working systematically with those pupils whose circumstances makes them vulnerable so they engage fully in their learning and enjoy it.
- Secure the leadership and management of the school by:
 - as a matter of urgency, establishing a permanent and effective senior leadership team
 - developing the roles and skills of the leadership team and middle managers
 - improving the effectiveness of governance.

Special measures: monitoring of The Willows Primary School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 8 and 9 February 2011

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, members of staff, pupils, parents and carers, the School Improvement Partner and members of the school improvement board.

Context

The executive headteacher continues to work across two schools, typically spending three days a week at The Willows. The teacher who coordinated the school's provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities left at the end of last term; her responsibilities are currently being covered by the executive headteacher and deputy headteacher.

The school improvement board was set up in June 2010 to undertake the responsibilities of the governing body. Responsibilities will transfer back in September 2011.

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

Pupils' attainment is low, but rising as pupils increasingly make better progress. Pupils were making good progress in around half of the lessons seen during the inspection and satisfactory progress in the other lessons. The school's tracking of achievement is developing well. The results of this tracking demonstrate pupils' improving progress. They also show that, while progress is still variable across the school, some pupils are now making rapid progress. Pupils are also enjoying learning more because teaching is improving.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- speed up pupils' progress and hence raise their levels of attainment in all classes – satisfactory.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Behaviour continues to improve and was good in the large majority of lessons visited during the inspection. Exclusions were common a year ago, but are now rare. Attendance rates are still low, but improving; fewer pupils are now persistently absent.

Pupils recognise and appreciate the school's improvement. They say that staff listen to them and value their ideas and opinions; the school council was able to point to a number of recent changes made in response to its suggestions. Year 6 pupils value

the leadership roles that were recently introduced, such as head boy and girl, and 'ecowarrior'.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching continues to improve. It was good in around half of the lessons visited and satisfactory in the other half; this figure matches senior leaders' own monitoring of teaching. At the time of the last visit, a number of weaknesses were common to many lessons. They included weak planning, a slow pace to the lesson and an inappropriate level of challenge for pupils. While these weaknesses are still evident in some lessons, they are less widespread and much less pronounced. Lessons now typically move at a more rapid pace, and teachers pay more account of the needs of pupils of different ability when they plan their lessons. Pupils say that lessons now challenge them more. At the time of the last inspection, teaching assistants sometimes dominated group activities, reducing opportunities for pupils to work independently; this is now rare.

There have been a number of improvements to the curriculum. For example, pupils in Years 5 and 6 have undertaken valuable residential visits and all pupils in Years 3 and 4 are now learning to play a brass instrument. There are, however, significant weaknesses in teachers' planning for integrated curriculum lessons. While some is good, much is not, and the general improvements in planning seen in other areas are not evident here. In many cases:

- activities do not challenge pupils sufficiently
- teachers are not clear about what they expect pupils to gain from the lesson
- plans do not support the development of pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding across different curriculum subjects.

As a result, the quality of teaching, and pupils' learning and progress, are noticeably weaker in integrated curriculum lessons.

There have been further significant improvements to the quality of care, guidance and support provided by the school. The way in which pupils' behaviour is managed has been sharpened further, and systems are now very clear and consistently applied by staff. All incidents of misbehaviour are logged and tracked, and the information is carefully analysed. It is put to good use to target additional support to pupils when their behaviour is becoming a cause for concern. It is also used to identify any trends or general problems, enabling staff to respond accordingly. For example, when the log showed that many of the incidents occurred at lunchtime, the school was able to react by providing additional training and support for lunchtime supervisors. Support for pupils with particular difficulties is flexible and targeted carefully to match their individual needs.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- develop further the school's curriculum – satisfactory
- improve aspects of care, guidance and support – good.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher continues to provide clear and very effective leadership. She manages her responsibilities across the two schools very well. This arrangement is successful, not least because the school's systems and the responsibilities of different staff are now very clear, and the school therefore runs smoothly. The executive headteacher is very well supported by the deputy headteacher, who joined the school shortly before the last monitoring inspection. Parents and carers spoken to during the inspection paid tribute to their considerable impact on their school.

Staff recognise and appreciate the school's rapid improvement; their morale is very good. They have benefited from a range of useful training. After a number of years of frequent change, the school's staffing is currently very stable. Parents point to the positive impact that this has had.

Good work is being done to improve the contribution that middle leaders are able to make to the school's improvement. Middle leaders have received a range of training, carefully selected to match their individual needs. Senior leaders provide them with good support and challenge, and the expectations of their roles are now much clearer. Middle leaders now have detailed plans for their areas of responsibility. These were produced collaboratively by each team; as a result, everyone understands and supports them. They are valuable working documents, displayed prominently on classroom walls and evaluated continuously by members of the team. At times, however, they focus on changes to the school's provision, but are not clear enough about the intended impact of these changes on pupils' achievement or other outcomes.

The school improvement board has developed significantly in the last term. It provides sharp accountability for the school's leaders in an effective and efficient way. Board members are working closely with the school's governing body to ensure that there is a smooth transition when responsibilities are transferred back in September.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- secure the leadership and management of the school – good.

External support

The school continues to draw on a range of support, carefully selected to ensure that it meets the school's current needs and requirements. The local authority, for example, has provided useful support for the development of provision in the Nursery and Reception classes. The School Improvement Partner at The Willows works closely with her opposite number at the executive headteacher's other school. They carry out very useful interim reviews of the school's effectiveness to

supplement Ofsted monitoring visits. Although still at an early stage, staff from the two schools are increasingly working more closely together.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve planning for the integrated curriculum so that plans for all lessons:
 - are clear about what the teacher intends pupils to gain from the lesson
 - include activities that challenge pupils of all abilities
 - support the development of pupils' skills, knowledge and understanding across different curriculum subjects.