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3 February 2011

Mrs L Jackson
Headteacher
Tow Law Millennium Primary School
Wear Street
Attlee Estate
Tow Law
Bishop Auckland
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DL13 4LF

Dear Mrs Jackson

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools: monitoring inspection of Tow Law Millennium Primary School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 2 February 2011, for the time you gave to our phone discussion and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please also pass on my thanks to pupils, staff, the chair of governors and the School Improvement Partner whom I met during the day.

As a result of the inspection on 6 and 7 October 2009, the school was asked to address the most important areas for improvement which are set out in the annex to this letter.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

The school has responded positively to the issues identified at its inspection in October 2009. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 has remained significantly below average from 2008 to 2010, but rose slightly in 2010. Compared with the previous two years, more pupils made expected progress across Key Stage 2 in English and mathematics in 2010. Half of this year group made more than expected progress in writing and slightly fewer in reading and mathematics. The school's own data indicate that fewer Year 5 and Year 6 pupils are currently on track to reach the levels expected for their age, particularly in writing. However, more pupils in Years 3 and 4 are closer to attaining age-related expectations in reading and mathematics, although fewer in writing. This is borne out by a scrutiny of pupils' work and through lesson observations undertaken during the monitoring inspection. Within the school, year groups of pupils are small; there are a high proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals and who have special educational needs and/or disabilities; some pupils join the school at other than the usual times.

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

There have been some improvements to the quality of teaching and learning which are beginning to have an impact. The school has now included discrete daily sessions to develop pupils' basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Pupils commented that they feel they benefit from the daily mental mathematics sessions and enjoy trying to improve upon their previous scores. These sessions have helped to increase the rates of progress made by pupils. Evidence seen in lessons, teacher's planning and in pupils' work indicates that teachers are making better use of assessment information to match work more closely to pupils' needs. Lessons now build upon prior learning. Teachers assess pupils' progress throughout the lesson and deal with any misconceptions promptly, ensuring that concepts in learning are reinforced. There are still some lessons where pupils of different abilities are given similar work and where the level of challenge is not quite high enough, particularly for more-able pupils, but overall this has improved. There are increasing opportunities for pupils to work independently or in groups or pairs, although occasionally pupils are dependent upon receiving help from the teacher and this slows the pace of learning. Teaching assistants are increasingly well used to support and extend pupils' learning, particularly those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities, enabling them to make similar progress to their peers.

Teachers consistently share learning objectives with the pupils in lessons, but these are often about what pupils are to do, rather than what they are to learn. Pupils commented that they found the success criteria (steps to show how pupils are to achieve the learning objective of a lesson) helpful so that they can assess for themselves how well they have done. The quality of marking has improved and is now more consistent across the school. Pupils say marking is helpful; they say they know what they have done well and how they can improve. Pupils are given opportunities to respond to marking, but occasionally, if they have not been given a point for improvement they are not always given another task to do and valuable time is wasted. Although pupils know their levels of attainment, some are less sure of their curricular targets to help them improve to the next level. Pupils are keen to respond to questions in lessons. However, questions are not always challenging enough to promote pupils' thinking skills and encourage them to think more deeply about their responses.

Pupils say they now have more opportunities to participate in practical and investigative work, particularly in mathematics and science and evidence of this was seen in pupils' work. The school is in the process of developing a more creative curriculum and creating links between subjects to help learning become more meaningful for pupils. There was evidence of pupils practising their writing skills in other subjects in lower Key Stage 2, but opportunities were more limited in upper Key Stage 2.

Senior and middle leaders have received support from the local authority in developing their understanding of the analysis of pupil performance data. Senior leaders have now taken on this responsibility and carry out regular pupil progress meetings, holding staff accountable for the progress pupils make and helping staff to analyse the data for themselves, identifying pupils who may need extra challenge or support. Leaders are now more involved in monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning through lesson

observations, joint scrutiny of pupils' work and teacher's planning, although the impact is yet to be seen in ensuring that teaching and learning are consistently good or better. They have analysed the amount of progress made by pupils as a result of the discrete basic skills sessions. They are able to demonstrate the impact of these sessions as seen in the increasing rates of progress made by pupils. Leaders are now engaged in nationally accredited courses in order to further develop their leadership and management skills.

The headteacher is highly committed to improving the outcomes for pupils and has a very clear vision for improving the school and increasing the life chances of its pupils. She has encouraged and supported leaders and managers to develop their skills and has given them opportunities to take further responsibility in making improvements. The impact of this work is beginning to be seen in the outcomes for pupils and therefore, while the school currently shows satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for further improvement, it is strengthening.

The local authority has provided effective support through consultancy and training and this is helping the school to improve. This has been appreciated by staff and leaders, particularly the contribution made by the School Improvement Partner.

I hope that you have found the inspection helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Christine Inkster
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place

- Raise attainment in Key Stage 2, by:
 - developing teaching strategies that will improve pupils' learning and progress
 - ensuring that teachers make better use of assessment information when planning work for individuals or groups of pupils
 - providing more opportunities for pupils to participate in practical and investigative work and for pupils to learn independently or with others
 - developing the curriculum so that pupils have more opportunities to develop their skills especially in writing, in a range of subjects.

- Develop the expertise of senior and middle leaders by ensuring that:
 - they receive further support and development in analysis of performance
 - they are more closely involved in monitoring and evaluating the impact of initiatives in order to drive improvement.