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29 September 2011

Mrs J Green
Executive Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
Church Road
Basildon
SS14 2EX

Dear Mrs Green

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Willows Primary School

Following my visit with additional inspector David Hatchett to your school on 27 September 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 March 2011. 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 – 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 Essex.

Yours sincerely

Michael Sheridan
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2011

- Increase the proportion of good and better teaching in order to accelerate progress, raise attainment and promote equal opportunities by:
 - raising expectations so that pupils are consistently challenged in lessons
 - making better use of assessment information to plan activities that move the learning of all pupils forward more rapidly
 - developing skills of teachers and teaching assistants in managing the behaviour of pupils in lessons
 - introducing different strategies to close the gap in achievement between boys and girls.

- Raise the achievement of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities by:
 - planning and delivering lessons to meet their specific needs
 - ensuring that they have frequent and direct input from their teachers
 - providing training for teaching assistants so that they can promote learning more effectively.

- Generate greater capacity for sustaining improvements in the school by:
 - increasing the effectiveness of the governing body
 - extending the role and skills of leaders in driving forward improvement
 - ensuring that members of staff act swiftly and decisively on action points
 - introducing a cycle of self-evaluation which includes all those involved in the school, including the governing body.

- Develop the curriculum so that pupils improve their key skills, their creative thinking and enquiry skills in different subjects by:
 - making more effective use of learning time, particularly in the morning
 - ensuring that planning shows how pupils are to develop their skills.

Special measures: monitoring of The Willows Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 27 September 2011

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and met with the executive headteacher, the acting headteacher, other senior leaders, a representative from the local authority, a member of the governing body, pupils and a small number of parents and carers. Inspectors scrutinised work in pupils' books, observed teaching and learning, and examined documents including pupil tracking data, records of monitoring, policy documents and reports from local authority advisers.

Context

The substantive headteacher resigned in August after a period of absence. The executive headteacher continues to work at the school for three days a week. The substantive deputy headteacher continues to be acting headteacher on the two days when the executive headteacher is at her substantive school. Five members of teaching staff left in August and five new members of teaching staff were appointed this term. The local authority has further increased capacity in leadership by seconding three senior members of staff to support the development of leadership structures. Two of these posts are due to expire shortly and one is a new appointment this term.

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

Pupils' enjoyment has improved through the development of themes in the curriculum and interesting enrichment activities. While the overall quality of teaching has not improved significantly, leaders have taken appropriate action to ensure that the oldest pupils are starting to make up for previous underachievement. Teaching is more consistently better in Year 6 than it is in the rest of Key Stages 1 and 2. The quality of teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage has remained strong so that children off to a good start in the school. Appropriate and well-focused interventions and additional one-to-one tuition for Year 6 pupils last year meant that more pupils made the expected progress from Key Stage 1, particularly in writing. While this helped some pupils catch up, it is not yet sufficient to eradicate the widespread underachievement found, nor does it prevent pupils falling behind where teaching remains weak. The inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities in class means that the work they are doing is more focused on their needs and more carefully monitored by teachers.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- accelerate progress, raise attainment and promote equal opportunities – satisfactory

- raise the achievement of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities – satisfactory.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Behaviour around school and in classes is calm and conducive to learning. Pupils say that they have seen an improvement in behaviour in most classes and teachers say that the guidance for managing behaviour is much clearer. The fact that pupils are enjoying their learning more is contributing to better attitudes and an increased eagerness to learn. However, low-level disruption is sometimes found in lessons where teaching remains fragile and in too many lessons, boys in particular switch off from their learning. Nevertheless, the good improvements seen in behaviour are likely to be significant in this school's journey. Attendance remains broadly average and there have been no exclusions since the last inspection.

The effectiveness of provision

Too many lessons remain inadequate, and as yet not enough are consistently good. Teachers are working hard to try to meet the expectations of leaders and consultants, but at times this leads to lesson structures being over-complicated. In several lessons, the focus is taken away from learning when teachers try to include all of the features that they believe should be in a lesson. On occasions, pupils are occupied with activities that have no apparent learning intention or are poorly matched to the learning identified by the teacher. Guided reading often lacks structure, with teachers too often listening to a group of readers without focusing on the skills pupils need to develop their reading and comprehension ability.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are less frequently taken out of the classroom and, in satisfactory and good lessons, this is having a positive impact on their learning and progress. Intervention programmes have been reviewed and support staff have been retrained in delivering the programmes the school has determined to be the most successful. These are due to be rolled out shortly, but it is not yet possible to review their effectiveness. It will be important for leaders to use their monitoring systems to ensure these pupils are making accelerated progress as a result of such interventions, and inspectors will want to see clear evidence of impact when they next visit.

Where better teaching is seen, teachers are planning more effectively for all groups of pupils and this is leading to increased progress, engagement and enjoyment. Teaching assistants' impact in class is improving but remains variable. They are receiving appropriate training to develop their basic skills. Their impact is noted most significantly when teachers plan specifically for their role, with clear guidance for how they want them to work. Teaching assistants fail to be effective when they focus too much on behaviour, or when they reduce pupils' independence and learning because they take too much control of the work that pupils are completing.

The curriculum is developing, with overview planning showing links between different subjects and skills. Links between different subjects are increasingly being made in some classes, and where this is happening pupils are enjoying learning more through a thematic approach. Pupils are being given more opportunities to consider real-life problems and these are helping them to think more deeply. Teachers are more aware of strategies to engage boys equally with girls, and where these are being applied, boys are making better progress. In some lessons pupils' interest levels can be seen changing as teachers engage the class in different ways. It is important for teachers to be fully aware of the engagement levels within the class and become more adept at adapting their teaching appropriately. The use of information and communication technology remains weak, particularly at Key Stage 2. Few effective examples were seen of technology being used in different subjects. The curriculum also lacks a consistent and systematic approach to developing reading and an understanding of the sounds letters make.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- increase the proportion of good and better teaching – inadequate
- develop the curriculum so that pupils improve their key skills, their creative thinking and enquiry skills in different subjects – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The executive headteacher is having a significant impact on developing the capacity of senior leaders. Key appointments have been made to middle leader positions to lead phases and subjects, but these are at a very early stage of development. Senior leaders are united in their shared vision for the school, and have introduced potentially effective systems and structures. Expectations have been set down and agreed for all teachers and these are used as a tool for measuring performance. Senior leaders' monitoring of the pace of improvements is broadly accurate, although their judgements about the improvements in teaching are overgenerous. Comprehensive and accurate data are collected to inform future priorities and identify the progress that pupils are making. Relationships with most groups of parents and carers are positive, although some have concerns about ongoing individual issues relating to their children. Much work has taken place to improve communication with parents and carers and involve them more in the life of the school. During the inspection, many parents and carers visited their children's classes as part of a curriculum open afternoon. This was well received and they enjoyed seeing the range of activities on offer.

The governing body is working with the local authority to clarify its role. Some governors are beginning to be involved in monitoring school performance. Most are fairly new and are yet to demonstrate a full and clear understanding of the challenges that the school faces. However, they do understand the importance of meeting statutory requirements and engaging with all stakeholders. Additional

governors appointed by the local authority are adding to the governing body's effectiveness. It is imperative for the continuing long-term sustainability of improvements that the governing body appoints a permanent, experienced and effective headteacher to replace the current temporary arrangements.

Leaders have developed systems that are helping teachers to plan more consistently to meet pupils' needs. As a result, pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are planned for as part of the whole class. However, such planning rarely has enough focus on the targets that have been set for these children and their individual needs. As a consequence, teachers tend to plan for them as part of the general lower ability group and this is not always appropriate. Better leadership of the provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is beginning to have an impact on teachers' confidence, with a useful weekly drop-in surgery for teachers and more organised systems for tracking pupils' progress and identifying appropriate support strategies.

Teachers say that they are clear about what they are expected to do and appreciate the support and training that they have had. However, the training that has taken place has been largely generic and the time is now right for the school to move to a more bespoke development regime, so that remaining inadequacies are eradicated decisively and satisfactory teaching is developed to be good.

School improvement plans identify appropriate actions and are clear about what will happen and when. However, they are less effective in identifying how leaders will know that their actions are being successful because they lack measurable and time-specific milestones.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- generate greater capacity for sustaining improvements in the school – satisfactory.

External support

External support has been effective in supporting the school in developing leadership capacity and moving forward appropriately against most of its priorities. The local authority has provided a comprehensive range of support as outlined in its statement of action, which is fit for purpose. Additional leadership capacity has been useful in supporting substantive leaders in developing their roles. The executive headteacher has provided a useful link with a successful school so that appropriate additional expertise is brought in to work alongside staff. Teaching staff have worked alongside local authority staff and trainers from a private agency. However, all this support has not yet been effective in eradicating inadequacies in teaching.

It is expected that schools in special measures who wish to appoint newly qualified teachers (NQTs) before the first monitoring visit seek the permission of HMI. This

procedure has not been followed in this case and the school, with the understanding of the local authority, has appointed an NQT to work at this school while employed at the executive headteacher's substantive school. Initial inspection of the arrangements to support this new member of staff appear appropriate but it is essential that the local authority takes particular care when monitoring the progress of this colleague so that her induction, support and training are not compromised by the significant pressures placed on the school during special measures.