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Mr David Bridge
Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
Church Road
Basildon
SS14 2EX

Dear Mr Bridge

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Willows Primary School

Following my visit with additional inspector Ken Parry to your school on 7 February 2012, 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 29 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.

Progress since previous monitoring – 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 second monitoring inspection on 7 February 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work and met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, groups of pupils, teachers, the Chair and Vice Chair of the Governing Body and a representative from the local authority. They scrutinised work in pupils' books, observed teaching and learning, and examined documents including pupil tracking data, records of monitoring and reports from local authority advisers.

Context

The school has appointed a permanent headteacher who started in January 2012. The executive headteacher has left the school, although her substantive school continues to employ and take responsibility for the induction of the newly qualified teacher working in this school. Two teachers have been absent from school for an extended period of time and their classes are being taught by temporary teachers. The local authority has seconded one member of staff to the school to increase leadership capacity.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Achievement is improving in line with the improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. Much work has taken place to ensure equality of access to the curriculum so that boys and girls are equally well engaged in their work. Pupils are enthusiastic about the curriculum and both boys and girls say that the range of activities that are planned for them are interesting and fun. There are signs in lessons and in pupils' books that the gaps in attainment between these two groups are beginning to close. The school's tracking data shows that pupils in Year 6 continue to make progress towards their targets and previous underachievement is being eradicated. The extent of progress in other parts of the school remains erratic but it is improving, with more pupils across different year groups making increased rates of progress. Achievement is stronger in English than in mathematics because the opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy skills are better focused than they are for numeracy skills. Intervention packages are increasingly well organised and delivered so they help pupils catch up in their learning. However, the school does not collect or use rigorously enough information about the impact of these intervention programmes. As a result, their full impact on individual pupils' achievement is not apparent.

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

- accelerate progress, raise attainment and promote equal opportunities – satisfactory
- raise the achievement of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities – satisfactory.

The quality of teaching

Teaching is improving. There are fewer inadequate lessons being taught and pupils' progress is increasing in most classes. While the school has rightly focused on reducing the amount of inadequate teaching, it is clear that there is still a way to go in completely eradicating such practice. Similarly, while more good teaching was observed during this inspection, too much remains satisfactory and this is not good enough to reduce the achievement gaps still evident in some year groups.

Planning is much more focused so teachers have a clear idea about how they are going to engage and challenge different groups of pupils. Teaching assistants are increasingly effective in supporting learning because they ask pupils questions that encourage them to think. Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are increasingly well supported in class, and when withdrawn, because their individual needs are better understood and catered for. The use of targets in lessons is increasing. As a result, more pupils understand what they are focusing on. The best use of targets is for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs. These pupils frequently discuss their targets in lessons so both adults and pupils maintain their focus on achieving them. However, targets for other groups and individuals are not always appropriately challenging and teachers' marking too infrequently refers to pupils' individual targets to help them improve their work.

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

- increase the proportion of good and better teaching – satisfactory.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour continues to improve. There have been no exclusions since the last inspection. Pupils say that behaviour is usually good around school and adults in school care for them. The low-level disruption that was seen on the last visit was not evident this time. Pupils around school are polite and welcoming. A small number of pupils display challenging behaviour in class, particularly when the activities and teaching are not well matched to their needs. During this visit, inspectors observed several pupils displaying such behaviour. On each occasion, effective strategies were employed, by teachers and teaching assistants, to ensure the safety and learning of others was not compromised.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leaders enthuse and motivate staff well. The new headteacher has quickly understood the priorities for improvement. His evaluations are accurate. Other senior leaders are now in a stronger position to drive school improvement. They have a much better understanding of their roles and they are able to identify the areas where they need to develop their own capacity further. Their evaluation of teaching is more accurate and they are able to point to successes in improving individual teachers' practice. Key to this has been the development of more bespoke training for different teachers. This has been well received by teaching staff and is beginning to have an impact in moving some teaching towards being more consistently good.

There is a clear sense of direction that is effectively communicated by senior leaders. They provide an appropriate balance of support and challenge. Phase leaders are in post and they have an understanding of the development needs within their year groups. The school is yet to establish subject leaders to ensure continuity in, for example, the development of literacy and numeracy. It will be important that these roles are developed so that whole-school strategies are planned and coherently applied throughout the school. Comprehensive pupil progress data continues to be collected and used to identify the achievement of different groups of pupils. However, it has not had a significant enough impact in evaluating school improvement because it is not used effectively by all leaders to understand the impact of developments on pupils' progress over shorter periods of time.

The governing body has continued to work with the local authority in understanding its roles and responsibilities. It has started to work alongside senior leaders in monitoring the improvements seen in school. Usefully, areas of responsibility have been assigned to individual governors so they each focus on a particular area of the school's development journey. The additional governor appointed by the local authority is providing useful educational expertise and is supporting the development of the governing body.

The curriculum continues to engage different groups of pupils well. Both boys and girls say they enjoy their learning. Lesson observations support this view. Teachers have a better understanding of what they are to teach as themes. The focus has rightly been on developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. However, the school is yet to ensure full coverage across all areas of the National Curriculum.

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

- generate greater capacity for sustaining improvements in the school – satisfactory
- develop the curriculum so that pupils improve their key skills, their creative thinking and enquiry skills in different subjects – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority has continued to provide a good range of support, particularly in relation to the strengthening of leadership capacity and in improving the quality of teaching. It has continued to maintain an additional assistant headteacher within the school. Consultants and advanced skills teachers have supported the improvements seen in some lessons. The governing body has been effectively supported in recruiting a new headteacher.

The newly qualified teacher has continued to be monitored by a successful school. The support she is receiving from within this school is proving useful and effective. The local authority have carefully monitored the effect of this support and offered frank and timely guidance where agreed protocols were not being followed.