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Mr A Bainbridge
Headteacher
Bernard Gilpin Primary School
Hall Lane
Houghton le Spring
Tyne and Wear
DH5 8DA

Dear Mr Bainbridge

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Bernard Gilpin Primary School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 14 March 2012 and for the information which you provided before and during the inspection. Please convey my thanks to the pupils, staff, members of the governing body and the representative of the local authority who gave their valuable time to talk to me.

Since the last inspection in June 2011 there have been several staffing changes as two members of teaching staff have left and three staff have been appointed. Two teaching staff were absent during the inspection. A deputy headteacher is now in post alongside the assistant headteacher. The school has been subject to extensive refurbishment work.

As a result of the inspection on 20 and 21 June 2011, 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 is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

The school has responded positively to the issues identified at its inspection in June 2011. The headteacher has a very clear and ambitious vision for the school. He has the confidence of the whole-school community because it is very apparent to all that the children are at the heart of all he does. The headteacher, members of the governing body and senior leaders have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and are ensuring that any issues are addressed through providing effective support or challenge. There are detailed school development plans which are providing a clear steer for school improvement. The roles of all school leaders are sharply defined and all staff are held accountable for the progress pupils make.

Senior and middle leaders are closely involved in a rigorous programme of monitoring and evaluating the work of the school through checking pupils' work and teachers' planning and observing lessons. A robust tracking system clearly identifies that the rates of progress

January 2012



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

made by most pupils are accelerating rapidly and that attainment is beginning to rise as staff are more aware of meeting the needs of every pupil. Pupil progress meetings are held each half term and any pupils who are underachieving are quickly identified and appropriate support is given, often by skilled teaching assistants. There has been particularly rapid progress made by pupils in Year 6 because of opportunities for these pupils to attend booster classes and receive one-to-one tuition. Similarly, strategies have been implemented to challenge more-able pupils so they can achieve their potential with some pupils tackling Level 6 work.

The quality of teaching is improving because leaders are tackling weaknesses. Teachers are benefiting from increased opportunities for professional development and from useful developmental feedback. Teachers consistently inform pupils of what they are to learn in each lesson and the steps they need to take to achieve the learning objective. Pupils are increasingly involved in self- and peer-assessment. Pupils have individual targets and say they are helpful in identifying what they have to do to improve. Marking and feedback identify the ways in which pupils can improve their work, although occasionally, they do not have an opportunity to respond to written marking. Better teaching seen during the inspection identified that teachers have good subject knowledge and use appropriate and subject specific vocabulary which encourages pupils to use and understand it. Lessons are conducted at a brisk pace and teachers are enthusiastic, making lessons interesting and stimulating. Pupils particularly enjoy discussing their work in pairs or participating in drama activities. Scrutiny of teachers' planning and pupils' work shows that work is now more closely matched to the needs of individual pupils. Misconceptions are handled sensitively and teachers occasionally stop pupils during the lesson to explain or clarify a point to help them move on in their learning. Most teachers now have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve because they are held more to account.

Pupils say that lessons are more fun and exciting because they are now engaged in a wide range of practical activities, including working in the hall and outdoors, and they particularly enjoy participating in educational games in English and mathematics. However, some pupils are not making as much progress as they are capable of because of a legacy of underachievement or they lack confidence in tackling new work. For some pupils, the gaps in their knowledge of basic skills, such as rapid recall of their times tables, are holding them back when attempting more challenging work. Work in pupils' books shows that the style of handwriting is not always consistent and work is not always presented as well as it could be. Occasionally, the amount of work completed by pupils is limited because the whole-class session is too long, so pupils do not have enough time to practise their skills and they become restless and disengaged in their learning. Pupils say that behaviour has greatly improved in the school and that it is now a much safer place to be.

The curriculum has improved and provides a wide range of practical activities and investigations, enabling pupils to find new things out for themselves. Planning now identifies systematically how pupils can develop their skills and knowledge, building on prior learning to ensure continuity and progression. There are many more opportunities for pupils to practise their skills in literacy and numeracy in other subjects. Topic themes are successfully



implemented, such as pupils developing their literacy skills through a history topic on the Second World War or through learning about the sinking of the Titanic. There is now a wide range of visits, including residential visits, to London and Kielder Forest, which are providing first-hand experiences for pupils and giving them opportunities to practise their basic skills. For example, prior to going to Kielder Forest, pupils used mathematics to work out the cost of the visit and the food necessary for the trip. There is now a wide range of visitors who come into school, such as authors and artists, and there are more extra-curricular activities including dance, football, gymnastics, martial arts and music clubs, which pupils say they enjoy. Multi-faith assemblies do much to promote pupils' understanding of those with faiths and cultures different to their own.

The role of the governing body has been strengthened as shown by the minutes of the governors' 'challenge meetings' when governors ask pertinent questions and hold the school to account, particularly in respect of the progress pupils make. School data are shared with them and they challenge staff to ensure that any underachievement is promptly tackled. The governing body has held meetings with parents and carers to seek their views and has made every effort to respond to their concerns. However, pupils say they have not met members of the governing body directly in order to share their views, although governors' visits to school are more regular to meet staff.

The local authority is providing appropriate support and challenge to the school, particularly in helping to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Its statement of action is fit for purpose.

I hope that you have found the visit 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 in June 2011

- Improve pupils' achievement, particularly in Key Stage 2, by:
 - providing pupils with learning experiences which are closely matched to their needs, so that all have an equal opportunity to succeed.

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is of at least a consistently good standard, by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what pupils are able to attain
 - providing pupils with enough time in lessons to put their new learning into practice
 - rigorously using assessment information to plan work which challenges or supports pupils in taking their next steps in learning.

- Improve the quality of the curriculum, particularly in Key Stage 2, by:
 - providing pupils with regular opportunities to investigate through practical activities
 - ensuring curriculum planning builds systematically on pupils' knowledge and skills
 - ensuring curriculum planning reflects an appropriate balance between different aspects of each subject – for example by ensuring that in mathematics, pupils have regular opportunities to apply their mathematical skills to problem solving
 - continuing to increase the number of opportunities for pupils to be involved in enrichment activities which add to their enjoyment of learning.

- Strengthening the role of the governing body in holding the school to account for the impact of provision on outcomes for pupils.

