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27 April 2012

Mrs Bray  
Headteacher  
Stephenson Lower School  
Canvin Way  
Bedford  
MK42 0HL

Dear Mrs Bray

**Special measures: monitoring inspection of Stephenson Lower School**

Following my visit with Clementina Ogunsanwo, Additional Inspector, to your school on 25–26 April 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 first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place on 8 November 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 Executive Director for Children's Services, Schools and Families for Bedfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Michael Sheridan  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## Annex

### **The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in November 2011**

- Raise attainment and increase pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics through:
  - ensuring that all children and pupils practise their reading and writing skills every day through a consistent, coherent whole-school approach to developing basic skills across the curriculum
  - ensuring that assessment information is used in class to plan activities which provide a suitable level of challenge for all groups of pupils
  - ensuring that assessment information is used at a senior level to closely track and monitor pupils' progress, identify underachievement and implement suitable interventions.
  
- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better by ensuring that all teachers:
  - have high expectations of what pupils can achieve
  - are clear about the learning outcomes they are seeking and select appropriate activities to achieve these
  - constantly promote and reinforce language through encouraging high-quality dialogue with and between pupils
  - use a range of techniques to fully engage the pupils and ensure they are active participants in their learning
  - when marking pupils' work, make clear how it can be improved
  - are encouraged to consider best practice elsewhere.
  
- Improve leadership and management across the school by:
  - clarifying the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders with regard to school improvement; in particular, rationalising and clarifying the leadership and management of provision and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities
  - ensuring that the systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school are sufficiently rigorous and lead to accelerated rates of progress
  - giving due attention to robust monitoring and evaluation of teaching; and providing guidance on improving this to a consistently good or better level
  - developing the role of subject leaders so they are better able to contribute to self-evaluation and improvements to the curriculum
  - ensuring that the governing body rigorously holds the school to account.

## **Special measures: monitoring of Stephenson Lower School**

### **Report from the first monitoring inspection on 25–26 April 2012**

#### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior leaders, teachers, officers from the local authority, members of the governing body and consultants who are working with the school.

#### **Context**

There have been several important changes since the previous inspection. The senior leadership team has been restructured. As a result, three assistant headteachers have left the school. A deputy headteacher and an inclusion leader have been appointed and assumed their posts shortly before this visit. An Early Years Foundation Stage leader has been appointed and will take up post in September. The school has appointed an Early Years Foundation Stage consultant to support developments in this part of the school until the substantive post holder is available.

#### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

Achievement is beginning to rise. Standards of attainment remain low but progress is starting to accelerate, particularly in the development of literacy skills. Reading and writing are more prominent in the curriculum. The school has developed its timetable so more time is spent developing these skills and less time is wasted. Pupils read regularly and, as a result, they are becoming more confident readers. Staff have completed training in a commercial phonics scheme so this is now being delivered, in attainment groups, with more confidence. As a result, pupils are more frequently engaging in conversations about strategies for spelling when writing in different lessons and there are early signs that spelling is improving.

The progress made by disabled pupils and those with special educational needs varies considerably. This is largely connected to the quality of support they receive. For example, some pupils, including some deaf pupils, make less progress than they are capable of because some of the support they receive in class does not always encourage them to think for themselves. In some cases, the answers that teachers want pupils to work out are given to these pupils by way of support. This means that they complete the task but make little progress in developing their understanding or skills.

Pupils enjoy learning and the curriculum includes a range of interesting opportunities that keep them interested. Pupils remain engaged and are learning at an increased pace as a result of better teaching.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- raise attainment and increase pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics – satisfactory.

### **The quality of teaching**

The quality of teaching is improving as a result of the professional development opportunities that have been made available. Teachers are increasingly using a variety of techniques to make their lessons more interesting. In most lessons, pupils work hard and respond well to teachers' questions and requests. Much less time is now wasted in most classes, so pupils start work quickly. Some teaching is still inadequate or barely satisfactory, and limited progress has been made in addressing this. The training opportunities to improve teachers' skills have been general, focusing on improving the overall quality of teaching rather than individual performance. Some teachers express frustration at this. Credible plans have been made to focus more sharply on the individual needs of teachers. It is important that this becomes the priority for the recently strengthened leadership team so that teachers can overcome remaining weaknesses and improve their practice, and are held accountable for doing so.

Improvements in the systems for recording assessment information are proving useful in enabling teachers to group pupils and plan increasingly appropriate work, particularly for reading and spelling. Marking and feedback remain weak in too many classes and this is a significant hindrance to pupils making the progress they are capable of. Much of the marking in the books seen provides an acknowledgement of work completed but does not give pupils any meaningful support to improve their work. In some classes, too much work is unmarked and there is little understanding of the purpose of setting targets for pupils' development.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better – satisfactory.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

Pupils' behaviour in class and around school is generally positive and this creates an atmosphere that is conducive to work. Pupils settle quickly to the tasks they are given and enjoy their lessons and learning. Behaviour is managed well. There are clear protocols at lunch time to ensure that high expectations of pupils' behaviour are maintained. In some classes, noise levels are high and teachers have to work hard to gain pupils' attention. This does not prevent pupils from working hard on tasks, but teachers struggle to make additional teaching points. Attendance has improved and is now average.

## **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

Leadership has developed considerably since the last inspection. Senior leaders now have a much better understanding of their roles and responsibilities. One of the most significant developments has been the restructuring of the senior leadership team. This has been done quickly and with a clear rationale for each of the positions created. The deputy headteacher and inclusion leader have very recently joined the school. They have quickly understood the immediate priorities for improvement and have a secure view of existing strengths and weaknesses. The headteacher is very ambitious for the school and has a clear and credible plan for rapid and sustained improvement that is already showing some initial success. There is still significant work to be done in developing subject leadership and ensuring the senior leader with responsibility for Early Years Foundation Stage is inducted successfully. However, there is clear evidence that the changes in leadership are increasing the capacity of leaders to drive school improvement. Previous inconsistencies, as reported following the last inspection, are no longer evident.

Leaders are using data about pupils' progress more effectively to identify and challenge inconsistencies in provision. Senior leaders have been quick to identify inconsistencies in the quality and accuracy of data and have used additional training and moderation to ensure a more accurate record of the progress pupils make.

The headteacher has demonstrated a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and the curriculum. Her judgements are in line with those made by inspectors. Leaders are yet to develop effective performance management arrangements or bespoke training for teachers who continue to demonstrate weaknesses following the general training provided by advisors and consultants. The increased capacity at senior leadership level means that this work can now begin in earnest, and plans to do this are robust.

The governing body is becoming increasingly effective at monitoring the work of the school and holding leaders to account. Much of its monitoring work is currently done through a strategic group whose members, between them, hold a useful range of skills and experiences. They share the headteacher's ambition for the school and talk with passion about the future and successes to date.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection:

- Improve leadership and management across the school – good.

## **External support**

The local authority has provided effective support. It has facilitated the restructuring of the senior leadership team and provided consultants to work alongside the headteacher and provide training for staff. It was asked by Ofsted to make some adjustments to its statement of action. While changes were made, several important omissions are still to be rectified to ensure support is resourced and evaluated

effectively. The single plan must identify what resources are being committed to particular priorities, the cost implications, and the criteria by which their effectiveness will be measured. Further to this, the single plan should have more realistic timescales. Currently, the timescale identified for being removed from special measures is too short.