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23 May 2012

Mr Hunter
Acting Headteacher
Buckton Vale Primary School
Swallow Lane
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Stalybridge
Cheshire
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Dear Mr Hunter

Notice to improve: monitoring inspection of Buckton Vale Primary School

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 22 May 2012 and for the information which you provided during the inspection. Please pass on my thanks to the representatives of the local authority, governors, parents and pupils who gave up their time, at short notice, to talk to me on the day.

Since January the school has been led by an acting headteacher, with strategic leadership provided part-time by an experienced headteacher nominated by the local authority. In addition, further support for leadership has been provided by an experienced deputy headteacher, on secondment from his school. The governing body has been strengthened and new parent governors have been appointed. An interim strategic group comprised of governors, senior leaders and a senior officer from the local authority has taken responsibility for ensuring that the issues raised by the inspection in November 2011 are dealt with successfully and on time.

As a result of the inspection in November 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.

There has been a step change in the progress pupils make in their reading, writing and mathematics. Following targeted intervention, pupils at Years 2 and 6 are set to record higher standards in their national tests and assessments than seen for many years. In particular, the more-able pupils, of whom there are many, are doing much better, achieving the higher levels of the National Curriculum and attaining closer to their potential than previously. All groups of pupils and all year groups are making better progress, often exceeding the challenging targets set for them. However, the detailed and considerably

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more accurate data on pupils' performance, now available to teachers and school leaders, show the legacy of underachievement still remains, particularly in Years 4 and 5.

The shortfalls in safeguarding policies and practice have been tackled vigorously. Improvements in site security, the rigorous insistence on the wearing of identification by adults and the tighter control of access to the different parts of the school are all clearly visible and reassuring to parents and carers and to pupils. Behind the scenes, all aspects of safeguarding have been audited and overhauled. The school maintains a rigorous single central record of adults in possible contact with pupils that meets all and exceeds some of the requirements. Governors and staff have undertaken training and the governing body now has access to high-level expertise on all matters concerning safeguarding within its membership. Policies have been renewed, updated and a programme of review has been put in place.

Equally vigorous action has been taken to improve the quality of teaching. Early audits following the inspection by the local authority, external consultants and by the school's new senior leaders revealed more concerns about teaching than were originally envisaged. Putting in place the elements of effective teaching highlighted in the inspection report has been an intensive focus for senior leaders and staff. Teaching has been an aspect under rigorous monitoring and evaluation. Staff accept how far their practice had slipped. Substantial progress has been made in a short period of time. The school's records and the evidence from the monitoring inspection show how teachers now plan to meet pupils' learning needs effectively, how pupils are clear about what is to be learned and what they need to do to get better still. The marking of exercise books is much improved. The walls of each classroom now celebrate pupils' work and are full of displays which are helpful to pupils while they work. Most significantly, teachers now know more precisely the level at which each pupil is working because their assessments are becoming rigorous and more accurate. They are using this information more effectively to set targets and ensure that pupils work towards their potential. Because of the speed with which improvement has taken place, the school acknowledges that a period of consolidation and embedding is required before consistency is fully realised. Nonetheless, teachers and teaching assistants have risen to the challenge very well. Their sense of teamwork has not faltered. Their morale and confidence are improving and they are determined to succeed.

The communication between the school and parents and carers is much improved. Many parents and carers made this clear during the monitoring inspection and in their responses to questionnaires sent out by the school asking their views. They acknowledge that many of improvements that have been made; for example, in homework, in e-mail messaging between teachers and parents and carers, in security and in the leadership of the school. They have retained confidence in the school. There has been no fall in pupils on roll and much interest in contributing as governors and as members of the new parents' and carers' forum (intended to support parents' and carers' involvement in the school's development and further improvement).

Weaknesses in leadership and management were at the heart of the issues raised by the inspection of November 2011. Their resolution is, therefore, central to the school's improvement. The strategy for improvement in leadership is proving successful. Each of the senior team is making a major, positive contribution to improving pupils' achievement and in building capacity within the school to sustain improvement. The teamwork between the strategic lead, the acting headteacher and the seconded deputy headteacher is proving very effective. It is sensitively judged, rigorous and active. The structures, direction and vision required for teaching to improve are now established and beginning to become embedded. Teachers are being supported well but are also being held to account by regular and rigorous monitoring exercises. Leadership is being extended to involve middle leaders. Teachers are keen to be more involved. A more resilient and responsive school is building, where leadership is seen at all levels. The better use of pupils' performance data is also reflected at senior level, so that the school's leadership is in a much stronger position to identify trends and take action where required. The work of the interim strategic group and that of the governing body is proving effective and complementary. There is a good level of harmonisation between the two. The interim strategic group is focused on the short term, supporting and challenging leaders to resolve the issues identified by the inspection and, in the longer term, for the governing body to prepare for the future leadership of the school. The governing body has made significant progress through training, for example, in safeguarding and in understanding the Ofsted framework. It is building its expertise, skill base and knowledge of the school as it functions normally during the school day. It is also much better informed.

The local authority's statement of action was judged fit for purpose. It contained a clear and detailed timeline throughout the period of the notice to improve. The local authority has provided immediate, decisive and effective support for the school. It has facilitated support that is making a major contribution to the school's improvement, such as in the strengthening of the leadership and, through the allocation of consultants, improvements in teaching. The interim strategic group is proving highly-effective in ensuring that the issues identified by the inspection are being dealt with and in building capacity within the governing body.

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,

Mr Brian Padgett
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Take swift action to ensure that all statutory requirements for safeguarding are met in full and all safeguarding documentation is up to date.
- Develop the skills of leaders, managers and governors to improve the school by:
 - ensuring that self-evaluation provides an accurate appraisal of the school's effectiveness
 - improving the quality of development planning so that it reflects precisely what needs to be done to consolidate success and secure further improvement
 - judging effectively the impact of teaching on pupils' learning
 - developing and implementing actions to promote community cohesion more effectively
 - taking more account of the views and concerns of parents and carers as well as helping them to support their children's learning.
- Improve the quality of teaching so that it becomes consistently good by:
 - increasing the pace and challenge of learning
 - better matching work to pupils' individual needs
 - improving the consistency of the quality of assessment and marking so that pupils understand clearly how to improve their work.