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28 June 2012

Mr David Bridge
The Willows Primary School
Church Road
Basildon
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Dear Mr Bridge

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Willows Primary School

Following my visit with Fatiha Maitland, Additional Inspector, to your school on 26–27 June 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 third 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 – good.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

Up to two newly qualified teachers may be appointed from September 2012, subject to the school’s plans for supporting these teachers and decisions about teacher deployment in the same year group. This will be discussed with me before an appointment is made.

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 third monitoring inspection on 26–27 June 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, groups of pupils, members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority. Inspectors also held informal discussions with parents and carers before school and during sports day.

Context

The deputy headteacher is currently absent from school. The seconded deputy headteacher is now employed directly by the school and is currently acting deputy headteacher. A teacher who was absent at the last monitoring visit remains absent. Two new teachers have been appointed; one part time and one full time. Both have been appointed as advanced skills teachers and have assumed middle leadership roles. Subject leaders are now in place.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Achievement continues to improve. Pupils in the current Year 6 have made accelerated progress this year and, as a result, are on track to meet floor standards in English and mathematics. While this is similar to the attainment reached by last year's leavers, it represents improved progress for this cohort over the short term. The current Year 5 will start Year 6 in a stronger position than the current Year 6. Underachievement that continues to exist in mathematics and reading is being tackled. Leaders are using data more diagnostically to identify pupils in need of additional support and this is being provided with increasing urgency, accuracy and success.

Children's basic skills in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 are improving at a rapid rate. Children are expected to leave Reception with the necessary skills to access the Key Stage 1 curriculum. Pupils are making better progress in reading in Key Stage 1 as a result of better teaching of the sounds that letters make (phonics).

Improvements in achievement remain most vulnerable in lower Key Stage 2 where teaching remains the most variable. Work in pupils' books shows that the variation in achievement between classes remains too great, and this is having an impact on the equality of opportunity in this part of the school.

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

Improvements in the quality of teaching have accelerated. This is largely because leaders have been successful in pinpointing weaknesses and providing coaching and mentoring specific to the needs of individual teachers. A higher proportion of lessons seen are good and fewer satisfactory lessons have fragilities. Scrutiny of work in books shows that teachers have an increasing awareness of how to support pupils in improving their work. While teaching is improving overall at a good rate, the quality of teaching remains too variable and a small amount remains inadequate. The strongest teaching is found in the youngest and oldest classes, with the most variable teaching being found in lower Key Stage 2.

The strongest teaching is providing a good model for developing consistent practice. In the best lessons seen, teachers are continually focused on developing literacy and numeracy skills. Teachers in these lessons know what it is that prevents pupils achieving higher levels and they work well with additional adults to provide a wide range of activities that meet different pupils' needs. The impact of additional adult help is improving and is best where teachers have provided clear and accurate guidance to teaching assistants. Teaching assistants have a better understanding of the ways that they can support pupils. They use their improved subject knowledge well. However, there are times when their limited subject knowledge still remains a barrier to supporting pupils effectively. One example of this is in the teaching of spelling and reading in Key Stage 2.

Marking and target setting are used increasingly well in most classes. All teachers use marking and target setting in line with the school's policy, but the impact of marking on pupils' progress remains variable. This is because teachers do not always know what advice to give pupils to improve their work over time and, in too many lessons, pupils do not respond to teachers' marking to make necessary improvements. In the best lessons, teachers give guidance and advice through marking that helps pupils to improve their work immediately, develop transferable skills, reflect on the quality of their work and to meet their targets.

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

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

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Relationships between pupils and staff remain strong and, in the best lessons seen, pupils' behaviour is a very positive feature. There continues to be some low-level disruption in weaker lessons where pupils do not know what they are supposed to do or where the work they are given does not engage them sufficiently. Systems for managing disruptive behaviour and promoting positive behaviour are secure and effective. Pupils take responsibilities seriously and almost all state that they enjoy school. Attendance is in line with the national average.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Leadership continues to develop well and is becoming less reliant on external support. Senior leaders have the respect of pupils, staff and parents. The headteacher has a clear and accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. He has restructured the senior leadership team so their focus is sharply on raising achievement. Data is being used more effectively to identify patterns and priorities. Leaders talk about the impact of their actions with more clarity because they can present evidence of improvements and point to where further work is needed. A programme of monitoring has been drawn up for the next academic year. This builds on the timetable that has been used this year and shows an increasing awareness of how senior and middle leaders will work together to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the school. This new plan, as yet, does not include any monitoring from the governing body.

Middle leadership continues to develop. Phase leaders are starting to have an impact on the quality of provision in their jurisdictions. These leaders know the strengths and weaknesses that exist, understand the areas for development and have formed credible plans for improving the consistency of teaching. Subject leaders have made a start in developing whole-school approaches with the intention of developing consistency in practice and effectiveness. All of these middle leaders talk convincingly about immediate priorities and they are beginning to develop ambitious visions for the future.

The impact of leadership has had the most conspicuous impact through the coaching programme that has been developed. Senior and middle leaders, including the advanced skills teachers, all support teachers in improving their practice. Teachers have been placed with the leader best suited to support them in providing a better standard of teaching. Teachers are very enthusiastic about this support. Inspectors saw its impact in many of the lesson observations during this visit. While this programme is proving successful in supporting development, it is less effective at holding teachers to account for their performance because it is not aligned with a formal performance management regime.

The governing body is increasingly well informed and continues to offer challenge and support. Some governors are involved in gathering evidence in school to support the school's self-evaluation. The time is ripe for named governors to start working

alongside middle leaders so that they are able to contribute to the school's self-evaluation and provide a robust and honest account of the work of the school in these areas to the wider governing body.

The curriculum is successful and meets requirements. The school is right to focus more firmly on the quality of teaching because it is here that improvements are most importantly needed. The curriculum is no longer a cause for concern.

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

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

External support

The local authority has continued to provide additional monitoring, brokering additional support where necessary. The local authority has, rightly, started to withdraw support as the school continues to develop its own capacity to improve. Consultants are working alongside middle leaders, providing coaching and specialist advice. The seconded deputy headteacher is now employed by the school and this further aids the transition of capacity from the local authority to the school.