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

Dear Mrs Bray

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Stephenson Lower School

Following my visit with Jeffery Plumb Additional Inspector to your school on 23–24 October 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 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 – good.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

The school may appoint one newly qualified teacher.

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 Bedford.

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 second monitoring inspection on 23–24 October 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with teachers, senior leaders, the local authority and representatives of the governing body. Inspectors talked informally with pupils and considered the results of the recently conducted questionnaire that has been completed by parents and carers.

Context

There have been a lot of staff changes since the last monitoring visit. Eight teachers have left the school and eight new teachers started in September. These included a literacy leader and an Early Years Foundation Stage leader. Eleven teaching assistants left in July and eleven new teaching assistants started in September. Twelve lunchtime supervisors have been replaced with play workers.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Attainment remains low and increasing progress further for underperforming groups remains a priority. There have been a lot of staff changes following the last monitoring visit and this led to pupils in some classes making slower progress in the final term of last year. Work in pupils' books and the improved quality of learning in lessons shows that pupils are beginning to make better progress in most classes. The data collected by the school about pupils' attainment are now much more accurate and this will be useful in measuring progress accurately in the future. Teachers are being held to account more for the progress that pupils make. Teachers and leaders meet regularly to discuss the performance of different groups and the strategies needed to help pupils catch up when they fall behind.

Pupils who have fallen behind in the past are being given extra help to catch up, both in class and through extra intervention sessions. While information shows that intervention sessions are having a useful impact in helping pupils make up lost ground, there are several reasons why they are not as useful as they could be. First, some teaching assistants remain distracted by their old roles and responsibilities, such as delivering first aid. Because of this, their sessions are not as organised as they need to be and they do not always start as promptly as they should. Second, there is no system for teaching assistants and teachers to tell each other what pupils have covered and achieved in sessions. This means that there is little to ensure the extra help pupils receive out of class is sharply focused on helping them make better progress in class. Third, some teaching assistants have not got the subject knowledge to be able to deliver some support precisely enough, particularly in

reading and spelling. In a small number of sessions, it was apparent that the work given to pupils was either too easy or too hard.

The school has a marking policy that makes it clear how marking and feedback should help pupils improve their work. The quality and impact of marking is improving. More marking is challenging pupils to improve their work and this is leading to more rapid progress. However, there are too many times when pupils are not given the opportunity to respond to their teacher's suggestions and this limits the impact of this feedback considerably. Marking and feedback is best in English and mathematics books. However, there are missed opportunities to encourage pupils to develop their literacy skills through other subjects. In some classes, work in these other subjects is scarcely marked and this is not good enough.

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

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

The quality of teaching

Teaching is improving. The endemic inadequacies seen at the last inspection are no longer evident and more teaching is good. Teachers are much more positive about the training and development they have received. They are positive about the future and eager to continue to improve. Inspectors observed more good teaching during this visit, but too much still requires improvement to overcome the significant underachievement that remains, particularly for higher ability pupils.

Teachers are getting better at asking questions that make pupils think. Where this is happening well, pupils are developing a richer vocabulary because they are helped to explain themselves clearly. However, in too many lessons, teachers talk too much so pupils spend too much time listening. In some of these lessons teachers do not explain tasks clearly enough so pupils are less sure about what is expected of them.

Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are receiving better support in classes. Teaching assistants and communicators for deaf pupils are working better to support teachers and this means that the pupils they support are accessing lessons more successfully.

Reading has an increasingly high profile in school. Pupils enjoy reading and regular guided reading sessions are contributing to pupils reading skills. Pupils are learning the sounds that letters make with increasing success. There are more good quality phonics sessions and these are having a positive impact on pupils' ability to read and write. Pupils are being encouraged to read with increasing frequency. There are many more books around school and adults, including those supervising at lunch time, regularly share these books with pupils.

There have been some improvements in the teaching of mathematics but there remains some way to go in ensuring all pupils make the progress of which they are capable. Crucially, not all teachers have yet developed strategies to ensure that pupils of all abilities are sufficiently supported and challenged so that they all make good progress.

Teaching in Reception classes has improved considerably. Previous inadequacies are no longer evident and much of the teaching here is good. In Reception, pupils develop language and social skills that will set them up well for the challenges of Key Stage 1. Opportunities for developing language and social skills are less well developed in the Nursery. Children are often too spread out in the very large Nursery so they miss opportunities to play alongside other children. Adults miss opportunities to model good language and encourage children to speak and answer questions.

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

- improve the quality of teaching so that it is consistently good or better by ensuring that all teachers – good.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour remains positive and pupils are highly motivated in lessons. The high noise level in classes reported at the last inspection has almost disappeared and pupils are much more responsive to teachers' requests for their attention, even in practical lessons. Lunch time is calm and pupils enjoy taking part in the range of games and activities organised by play workers. There is a very positive relationship and mutual respect developing between adults and pupils and this is having a considerable impact on the improved environment for learning.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The senior leadership team are relentlessly ambitious for the school. The headteacher has managed to develop a very positive ethos within school, with most adults being fully committed to the challenging improvement agenda set out.

Senior leaders have a clear understanding of the issues that they still need to resolve. They are justifiably proud of the improvements seen so far. Senior leaders have been robust in making difficult decisions. As a result, the pace of improvements is increasing. The school is ready for the local authority to hand over responsibility for school improvement planning to the senior leadership team, while the local authority maintains a responsibility for challenging the robustness of plans and intended outcomes. School improvement planning has become clearer, with timescales and resources being identified more frequently. However, this planning needs to be tightened further to ensure that actions are measured against the

difference they make for pupils. Too often, school improvement is considered successful because a new policy is being implemented. Leaders have yet to make this process more meaningful by questioning the quality and effectiveness of the changes made in improving outcomes for different groups of pupils.

Performance management is being used well to plan professional development for individual members of staff. Staff are very positive about the support and challenge they receive. Some teachers have made very positive improvements in their practice. Many new teachers talk very passionately about the positive ethos generated by the senior team and the influence this had on their decision to apply for their jobs. The negativity about the need to change and improve observed at the last inspection has all but disappeared.

Middle leadership is developing. A literacy leader has been appointed. This leader demonstrates a secure understanding of the subject and has started to pull together an action plan for future developments. Senior leaders appreciate that it is important that this becomes closely tied into the school's main plan and that actions are tightly focused on raising standards of literacy throughout the school, particularly for underperforming groups.

Numeracy is being temporarily led by the deputy headteacher so that school improvement in this area continues. The deputy headteacher has a secure understanding of the subject and has suitable plans for developing teachers' skills further. The school intends to appoint a numeracy leader before the next monitoring visit and inspectors agree that this would be a sensible development.

The new Early Years Foundation Stage leader has had a strong impact on the quality of provision in the Reception classes. The school acknowledges that it is important that the same level of improvements take place in the pre-school and Nursery so that these children are well prepared to access some more formal learning once in Reception classes.

The governing body is very robust in holding the school to account. Its members have a range of expertise well suited to providing support and challenge to leaders in the school. Their knowledge of the school and its journey is impressive. There is little doubt that this governing body is a strong force for change and improvement in this school.

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

- improve leadership and management across the school – good.

External support

The local authority has continued to provide support through consultants and leading teachers. This has been useful in improving some poor teaching. The local authority is aware of the value of brokering the support of strong middle leaders from other schools to act as critical friends to the new middle leadership team as they establish themselves in the school. This will be particularly important for numeracy, literacy and Early Years leaders. The local authority has also provided support and training for the school in working with underachieving individuals in some year groups. This is through a programme called 'achievement for all'. The success of this support is yet to be determined.