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23 November 2012

Mrs D Wakelin
Meeching Valley School
Valley Road
Newhaven
East Sussex
BN9 9UT

Dear Mrs Wakelin

Special measures monitoring inspection of Meeching Valley Primary School

Following my visit with Veronica Young, Additional inspector, to your school on 21 and 22 November 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you, your staff, pupils, governors and the representative from the local authority gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous inspection.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2012. 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published 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 East Sussex.

Yours sincerely
Sheila Browning
Additional inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2012

- Ensure that teaching promotes pupils' achievement well by:
 - developing teachers' understanding of the teaching of phonics
 - developing an effective whole-school approach to the teaching of spelling, punctuation and handwriting
 - ensuring that there is a clear analysis of gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding, and that this information is used to match tasks and support in lessons to meet pupils' needs
 - providing success criteria so that pupils' progress can be assessed accurately at a range of levels
 - giving pupils more opportunities to write at length in a range of subjects
 - ensuring that introductions to lessons are not overlong and encouraging pupils to develop the skills to work independently
 - ensuring teachers' questioning is challenging and probes pupils' understanding.

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at senior, governor and middle management level by:
 - developing leadership capacity to give teachers the support they need to improve their skills
 - improving the use of data so that pupils' progress is monitored accurately and the information used to ensure that individual needs are met
 - increasing the involvement of the governing body in strategic planning in order to improve its role in raising pupils' attainment.

Report on the first monitoring inspection on 21– 22 November 2012

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, met with the Chair of the Governing Body, the headteacher and the executive headteacher, middle leaders and a representative from the local authority. The inspectors held discussions with pupils, and heard a small number read. Inspectors observed 13 part lessons, some of which were jointly observed with the headteacher and the executive headteacher. Inspectors also observed several small group sessions including the teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make). Account was also taken of the responses to a recent questionnaire used by the school to obtain parents' views.

Context

Since the inspection in March 2012, there have been significant changes in the leadership and management of the school and staffing structure. A National Leader in Education from a local school has been appointed for one year as executive headteacher. The executive headteacher works in the school for two days a week and Meeching Valley is working in partnership with the executive headteacher's school to utilise its resources, including senior and middle leaders and teachers to support improvement. The Chair of the Governing Body resigned and the Vice Chair was appointed in March 2012, the committees restructured and one new governor appointed. In addition, two teachers left, and two members of staff joined the school and are teaching in the Reception class and in Year 2. All but one member of staff now teaches a different year group. Two key stage leaders have been appointed to share responsibilities more widely. The number of pupils on roll has increased since March, including the percentage of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium, and the proportion of pupils supported by school action or with a statement of special educational needs.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Unvalidated results in national tests for Year 6 pupils were disappointing and showed a decline from the previous year, particularly in mathematics and writing. Pupils fell short of meeting the government floor target which sets the minimum standards for pupils' attainment and progress. Results were well below those nationally though the gap between boys' and girls' attainment narrowed in reading and writing. Senior leaders identified the reasons for this, these being considerable disruption to staffing and consequently disjointed teaching. This meant there were gaps in pupils' knowledge and insufficient progress made to help them 'catch up' to age-related expectations. The Year 2 results show a significant improvement in all subjects and especially in mathematics and results were above the school's revised targets set by

the local authority. Nonetheless, results remain below those found nationally. Boys attained better than girls in mathematics but this was reversed for writing. The results for children leaving the Early Years Foundation Stage showed improvement on the previous year. However, the school and local authority acknowledge that some assessments may not be secure. Children enter with much lower language skills and in some cases with poor social skills for their age and have limited experience of reading and writing. Improvements in the Reception class ensure children's knowledge of phonics is taught more effectively and that they have more appropriate learning experiences. Of the pupils in Year 1, just over a third achieved the nationally expected standards in the phonics screening test. The support for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs has been reviewed and as a result it is improving. This is helping these pupils make more rapid gains in their learning from their starting points.

The school's checks on pupils' progress, evidence from lessons, and some pupils' books indicate that pupils make better progress in reading, writing and mathematics from their starting points, though it is still uneven across the school. Previously, pupils were not being taught phonic skills often enough. The daily whole-school phonics sessions are now focused on basic language work, such as learning letter sounds and combinations, and are having a significant and positive impact on pupils' reading and writing skills. Inspectors heard some pupils read and they said that they were heard to read daily. Substantial support from the local authority's literacy and mathematics consultants are supporting planning to help extend pupils' writing abilities and pupils' achievement in mathematics. However, pupils have few opportunities to write at length or in different subjects and more able pupils do not develop their own writing enough. Gains are evident in pupils' mathematical knowledge and teaching is focused on 'plugging the gaps' in pupils' learning, but few lessons enable them to participate in practical fun activities that would help them understand mathematical concepts better. More recently across the school, pupils are starting to make better progress than before, but it is not yet rapid enough. This is true for pupils who receive free school meals and the gap between their achievement and pupils of similar ability nationally remains too wide.

The quality of teaching

All teachers and other adults have had clear guidance and training on the teaching of phonics and leaders have made sure that pupils have daily phonics lessons. Consequently, pupils now make better progress than before. Teachers show a clearer understanding of the standards pupils should be working at and check more regularly that pupils make sufficient progress. Lesson plans refer to learning tasks for pupils of different abilities but are not always well matched to their needs, sometimes being too easy or occasionally too hard. The use of timers has helped teachers to keep lesson introductions shorter. Staff training has enabled teachers to use questioning as a key means of checking what pupils know and have learnt but rarely challenges or probes pupils' deeper understanding. The school's marking policy is not consistently applied. Although work is marked regularly and praise given

for good efforts, few comments point to how pupils can improve their work, or refer to how pupils can meet their individual learning targets. Much work in books is untidy, with gaps in work, poor spelling and punctuation that are not always picked up by teachers. Pupils have handwriting practice but there is little evidence of the skills learned being used in other subjects. Pupils who are new to English or speak English as an additional language make similar progress to their classmates. They have extra support in class which means they can take a full part in lessons. The school's parent survey indicates that most parents who gave their views think that their children are taught well at the school. Inspectors found that this is not the case in all year groups as teaching is uneven across the school. It is good in Reception, and in Years 2, 3 and 6. In the other year groups, pupils spend too much time listening and preparing for writing, so there is not enough time given to actual writing. Progress slows down when time is wasted, whether it is dealing with those who have complex behaviour needs or when pupils spend time doing dull activities in lessons that do not improve their learning.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Although the majority of pupils behave well in lessons and around the school, there are a few who find it difficult to respond to the school's expectations of good behaviour. Some of these pupils are new to the school. Poor behaviour is usually dealt with well but pupils say teachers are not consistent in managing behaviour. Pupils feel safe and well cared for. Although some bullying occurs they say it is mostly name calling and is dealt with promptly by staff. There have been no racist incidents or homophobic bullying noted by the school. However, the same few names appear too often in the school behaviour log and reports are not sufficiently detailed. In the past pupils could go to a pastoral room 'to cool off' and by some this was wrongly viewed as a privilege. Its use is now more carefully regulated but still allows pupils at points of crisis some respite from others. Attendance levels have fallen more recently following a rise last year as a few new arrivals regularly miss school.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

There is evidence of strengthened leadership since the previous inspection. School improvement planning and leaders' overview of the school are realistic and accurate. Many systems have been put into place and while some are still developing others are now firmly in place. Policies, although recently reviewed, are not all applied consistently. Information about the progress pupils make is more accurate and regular pupil progress meetings make sure teachers are held to account and that pupils lagging behind are identified quickly. Middle leaders have started to check the work of the school more regularly after some restructuring. They review teachers' planning and work in pupils' books, but as they are new to the role, their skills are developing. There is a much sharper focus on how to improve the school's effectiveness, and leaders and staff have been very focused on putting systems in place to tackle the weaker aspects of the school. There is still more work to do to

improve teachers' skills and understanding and for some it has been a very steep learning curve. While additional time is allocated for staff training and checks on the school's work, some staff have found the comprehensive training programme, support and guidance overwhelming. The executive headteacher is seeking to develop training in time management for staff to help resolve this and to build their confidence.

Checks on teaching quality are regular and senior leaders follow up areas of weakness and do not shy away from giving hard messages where needed. The relatively inexperienced headteacher particularly has benefited from the expertise of the executive headteacher. She recognises that she needs to steer the school forward at a faster pace. Leaders, staff and governors have secured some key improvements in pupils' behaviour, systems to check the school's work and in the collection and use of pupil progress information as well as embedding the teaching of phonics across the school and informing parents more frequently about their child's progress. Although much work has been done they have yet to secure greater consistency in the quality of teaching. The needs of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are carefully recorded and links with external agencies are strong. The coordinator is eager to ensure that such pupils are consistently well-supported, while they are helped to learn more independently.

Leaders are aware that the curriculum provides too few opportunities for role play, investigation and practical 'hands-on' learning that motivate and engage pupils so that their learning is fun. To some extent this reflects teachers' lack of confidence to move away from some of the more structured lesson plans and to be more flexible in their planning. The governing body has sought the views of parents and is keen to involve them in the life of the school. Governors attend pupil progress meetings and visit the school to check its work. The minutes of governing body meetings give examples of how it holds the school to account. The Chair of the Governing Body is aware of the need to show the impact of pupil premium funding on their performance and checks are in hand. Safeguarding requirements are met fully and ensure staff vetting procedures are thorough.

External support

The local authority's statement of action addresses all the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection and has a realistic expectation regarding the school's removal from special measures. The school has benefited from good quality support from the local authority, including from consultants and the National Leader of Education (executive headteacher). This support has been most effective in supporting leadership in particular and the capacity to improve. The executive headteacher plays a key role in strategic planning and the drive for school improvement. The school relies too heavily on external support as its capacity to improve is not yet fully secure as new management arrangements are taking time to become effective.