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27 March 2013

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

Dear Mrs Wakelin

Special measures monitoring inspection of Meeching Valley Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 25 and 26 March 2013, 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 gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second 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 second monitoring inspection on 25 and 26 March 2013

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Chair of the Governing Body, the headteacher and the executive headteacher, senior and middle leaders and a representative from the local authority. The inspector held discussions with pupils, and heard a small number read. The inspector observed 10 part lessons of which all were jointly observed by headteacher, executive headteacher, senior and/or middle leaders.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection the school roll has increased. Two new teaching assistants have been appointed to the school, one to support the increased roll in Year 1 and the second to support in the Reception class. Considerable building works are ongoing and specifically to improve the outside provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage and, because of this, children have restricted access to using this outside area until the works are completed.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Since the previous monitoring visit, pupils' progress shows signs of improvement and any underachievement is being identified more quickly due to rigorous checks and monitoring. However, pupils' attainment remains below the national average. The gap between boys' and girls' achievement is closing. The gap in attainment for pupils known to be in receipt of additional government funding through the pupil premium is narrowing in both English and mathematics, compared to all pupils nationally. In fact these pupils achieve better than their classmates. Nevertheless, pupils' progress is still too variable between year groups or classes. Over time, Year 2 pupils continue to make the least progress compared to other year groups. Pupils who are disabled, and those with special educational needs, now make better progress because of the sharper analysis of their needs and improvements in the quality of support, interventions and teaching. There is a clearer analysis of gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. This information is used with greater understanding by teachers to plan tasks and support in lessons that better meets pupils' needs.

Strikingly, the learning environment now celebrates pupils' work and achievements more effectively. Displays show the greater emphasis given to writing in a range of subjects and this work is well presented. A recent visit to the Tate Britain art gallery enabled Year 6 pupils to write at length about the trip, research artists such as Lichtenstein and Warhol, and produce some impressive artwork. Year 4 pupils produced interesting booklets about their visit to Preston Manor, while Year 3 produced some good quality information and research on the history of Newhaven, especially the bridges. Pupils' books show a wider range of writing and work compared to the last monitoring visit. However, the quality of work in them is mixed.

Pupils have regular opportunities to practise their handwriting and this shows some improvement. Pupils are proud to get a 'pen licence' as a mark of their improved letter formation.

Pupils enjoy reading. Guided reading is a regular feature of daily learning. Specific programmes are used well to support lower achieving pupils to catch up on their reading and writing skills and are beginning to have a positive impact on their progress. Last year less than half of the children passed the national phonics screening check in Year 1. The phonics programme (the sounds that letters make) is now secure and pupils are using the skills learnt to help when writing and reading.

The quality of teaching

Teachers and teaching assistants have received significant support from the headteacher, executive headteacher and local authority advisers in a wide range of areas. As a result, the quality of teaching is beginning to improve, but it remains too mixed in quality. Leaders know this and are taking steps to tackle the issue head on. Staff are responsive to coaching and training, some are very reflective about their practice. The quality of lesson planning and sharing of what pupils are going to learn and why has improved. Teachers have a clearer understanding of assessment information and what pupils should achieve compared to all pupils nationally. Termly pupil progress meetings ensure staff have an increasingly better dialogue about pupils' progress and achievement. Where the teaching is higher quality, work is exciting, challenging and practical so that pupils' learning is stretched and the pupils are more motivated. In a Year 5, lesson about the Second World War, excellent teaching ensured memorable learning. Pupils talked about their visit to the war memorial earlier that morning, showed empathy with what an air raid might be like, having sheltered under their tables and in the mock up air raid 'Anderson' shelter in their classroom. They listened to Churchill's speech and performed the King's VE Day speech, discussed and compared information on war fatalities and reflected on the consequences of the war. This was followed up by singing, 'We'll meet again' and having a VE Day party.

All classes feature helpful displays which support literacy and numeracy and are generally used well as a resource to guide pupils' learning. Teachers and teaching assistants use questioning well and the use of talk partners to tackle misconceptions and to accelerate each other's learning. Weaknesses in teaching remain, however, with slow pace, insufficient challenge and mediocre expectations which limit pupils' progress being the main concerns. At present, there is not enough good teaching to rapidly accelerate pupils' progress.

The school has an agreed marking policy. The quality of marking and feedback has improved, but is inconsistent across year groups. While teachers pay greater attention to pupils' spelling, punctuation and handwriting, marking does not always point to what pupils need to do next to improve their work. In a few classes this is done really well and pupils are given specific time to respond to the teachers' comments. Marking in writing is more effective than in mathematics.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour in lessons and about the school is still typically good. During the special Easter breakfast held at the beginning of the day, it was exemplary. Although very excited, pupils responded well to 'good looking, good listening'. Pupils have good attitudes to learning, and although a small number have significant behaviour issues, they are well supported. One pupil said, 'If I feel angry, I know how to manage it now.' Pupils have noticed how the school has improved too and say, 'It's better learning now because it's more interesting and we get to use more equipment.' They told the inspector how much they were looking forward to the 'Meeching's Got Talent' show on Thursday. The special educational needs coordinator works closely with outside agencies and parents to support pupils most vulnerable. This is having a good impact on these pupils' learning and attendance. The attendance and punctuality of a few remain a concern despite leaders working with families including providing alarm clocks, collecting pupils from home and stressing the importance of regular attendance. Pupils say this is a 'safe friendly school', are quite clear about bullying, although say it happens rarely.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The executive headteacher and headteacher are aware that pupils' progress is still too slow for many pupils. Senior leaders' self-evaluation of teaching is accurate and now more robust and teachers have targets related to pupils' achievement as part of their performance management. Considerable support has been given to improve teaching, but improvements are not yet consistent enough to secure pupils' rapid progress. Middle leaders, supported by the local authority advisers, are developing roles further including observing the quality of teaching. The deputy headteacher has improved her oversight of the 'big picture', her role in school improvement and is more confident using information on pupils' progress to identify any pupils in danger of lagging behind. The headteacher has developed her skills in the evaluation of pupil progress information and in gauging how well initiatives are working, and has acted quickly where teaching is inadequate. These developments mean that the school is starting to build its own capacity to make improvements.

The curriculum continues to be developed, as are the policies to set common expectations. Pupils have more exciting opportunities to learn through 'learning journeys', as, for example, when Year 6 pupils in role as Saxons and Normans developed their algebraic skills to work out battle manoeuvres. Year 3 enjoyed cracking eggs open to find hidden inside Easter words on rolled up paper to use in their poetry writing. Improvements are also seen in the classroom organisation and planning for the youngest pupils to develop greater independence. However, children are still over reliant on adults to show and lead learning and need much encouragement to be engaged and extend their vocabulary. The vet's role-play area proved popular, with children dressed as animals 'being treated' by the vet, appointments being made and children extending their speaking skills by giving advice on animal care.

Governors, particularly the Chair of the Governing Body, are determined to increase the pace of improvement. The committees are working more effectively and governors are involved more strategically. Governor training has helped them to ask more probing questioning about the school's performance. The school continues to try and engage more parents in their children's learning and has surveyed their views. Additionally, various workshops are run to help parents support their child's learning and for parents to gain qualifications themselves.

External support

The local authority has provided significant support for the school, especially to improve teaching skills, although recognises improvements are taking time. Advisers have worked closely with middle and senior leaders to develop their monitoring skills. The executive headteacher has provided invaluable support for the headteacher and is gradually reducing the support as she gains in experience.