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Paul Driver and Patricia Ginsberg
Interim Headteachers
Featherstone Wood Primary School
Featherston Road
Stevenage
SG2 9PP

Dear Mr Driver and Mrs Ginsberg

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Featherstone Wood Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 2 July 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the outcome and findings of the inspection. Thank you for the help you both 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 was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in December 2012. 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 the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, and the Director of Children's Services for Hertfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Linda Killman
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Increase the proportion of teaching that is at least good by:
 - ensuring teachers always match work closely to the learning needs of different groups of pupils
 - making sure that set tasks keep all pupils working hard throughout the lesson
 - sharpening teachers' questioning skills so that lesson introductions in particular make all pupils think deeply, including the more able
 - ensuring teachers always have suitably high expectations for pupils' behaviour and make full use of the school's system for managing inappropriate behaviour
 - making sure all marking makes clear to pupils what they need to do to improve their work
 - providing training for teachers in the specific areas listed above and focusing leaders' checks on the quality of teaching on improvements in these areas.

- Raise achievement, particularly in mathematics in Years 3 to 6, and ensure boys and girls make at least the expected progress in every year group by:
 - increasing opportunities for pupils to solve problems for themselves in mathematics
 - ensuring pupils develop a fluent style of joined handwriting that assists them in writing faster and at greater length.

- Develop the role of subject leaders and ensure they make a greater contribution to raising pupils' achievement and improving the quality of teaching, particularly in English, mathematics and science.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 2 July 2013

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector met with the interim headteachers and a representative from the local authority. The interim headteachers and HMI observed teaching and learning in all classes with the exception of Year 3, who were out of school. The school's most recent information on pupils' attainment, progress and attendance was analysed. Arrangements for the safe recruitment and vetting of staff were checked. Plans for improvement and information about the school's progress were scrutinised. Outcomes of a recent local authority review were taken into account.

Context

The headteacher has resigned since the previous monitoring inspection. The local authority arranged cover for the summer term to be provided by two experienced headteachers who are job-sharing until the end of term. From September, a different interim headteacher takes over while the recruitment process to find a new permanent headteacher takes place. The deputy headteacher has been absent since February. A deputy headteacher was seconded to the school on a temporary basis to take on this responsibility. From September, an acting deputy headteacher is joining the school. Once the new headteacher-designate is appointed, the acting deputy headteacher will be replaced with a permanent appointment. Two teachers are leaving the school at the end of term and replacements have been appointed. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body have resigned with effect from mid-September.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Long-term absence of the headteacher (who has since resigned) and deputy headteacher, who is also the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), left the school in a fragile state at key leadership level and initially slowed the pace of improvement. Current leaders responded quickly and determinedly to the challenge of getting the school back on track towards its removal from serious weakness categorisation. They are taking effective steps towards securing good behaviour and teaching, and this is making a difference. Teaching is improving, with an increasing proportion that is good. Most pupils have made better progress this year than previously, especially in Key Stage 2. Subject leaders are receiving training to develop their skills in monitoring the effectiveness of teaching and learning in their subjects. The local authority has strengthened governance, ensuring that new governors have the right experience and skills to support and challenge the school in the period leading up to its next section 5 inspection. Safeguarding requirements are met. The budget is healthy and the governing body has ensured that learning is well resourced.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The interim headteachers have ensured that their responsibilities are split equitably to avoid duplication.
- They set clear expectations and convey consistent messages.
- The school has stuck with its original plans for improvement, which are secure.
- Teachers are working hard to improve their performance in the classroom and as leaders of subjects, with good guidance from the interim headteachers and other external professionals.
- Teachers are meeting with senior leaders to discuss pupils' progress and, as a consequence, the work set for pupils in class meets the needs of most groups.
- Teachers' marking is improving and pupils are familiar with their targets for improvement.
- Pupils are setting out their work carefully, although the quality of their handwriting requires improvement.
- Resources are of good quality, classrooms are organised well and eye-catching displays celebrate pupils' achievements.
- The recruitment process to replace two leaving teachers has been rigorous and successful.
- Staff are committed to raising pupils' achievement.
- Parents and carers are increasingly supportive of the school and are more engaged in their children's learning.
- Pupils' behaviour is improving strongly because staff are implementing the simplified behaviour policy consistently. Most pupils are responding well to guidance and instructions in lessons.
- Handover to the incoming leaders has been planned for appropriately to ensure continuity.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- The school's capacity to sustain improvements over time is limited until a permanent headteacher is appointed.
- Pupils who are most at risk of underachievement are not making enough progress because the SENCO's long-term absence has not been covered effectively.
- Attendance is below average. Although slightly better than in 2012, it is not improving quickly enough.
- Most pupils are making expected progress and some are making more progress than is usually expected, but inconsistencies remain across the school.
- The school remains dependent on external support from the local authority to secure improvement.

External support

The local authority has acted quickly and effectively to provide the right support to sustain improvements. Reviews of the school's progress are regular and thorough. The local authority is responsive to the school's needs and has successfully brokered experienced leaders to move the school forward. It is supporting the school in recruiting a new headteacher and future governors of sufficient calibre to provide strong and effective leadership.