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Mrs S Best
Headteacher
Little Marlow Church of England School
School Lane
Marlow
SL7 3SA

Dear Mrs Best

Special measures monitoring inspection of Little Marlow Church of England School

Following my visit to your school on 24 and 25 September 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 January 2013. 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 Interim Executive Board, the Director of Children's Services for Buckinghamshire and the Diocese of Oxford.

Yours sincerely

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2013

Ensure that teaching is consistently good so that pupils' progress in English and mathematics in Key Stage 1 improves by:

- ensuring teachers make sharper use of information about pupils' progress to identify and tackle underachievement
- ensuring teachers plan work that is at the right level for pupils, not too hard or too easy, and that focuses on developing basic numeracy and literacy skills at a good pace
- improving teachers' confidence and skills in teaching the sounds that letters make (phonics)
- making sure that teachers always expect enough of their pupils so that they are inspired to learn, work hard, concentrate on their work and behave well
- reducing the use of worksheets in subjects such as science
- ensuring that teachers are given clear guidance and set sharp targets to help them improve their teaching and check that it is having the desired effect.

Improve leadership and management by:

- ensuring pupils are kept safe by systematically carrying out assessments of potential risks and taking appropriate action where needed
- making better checks on the quality of teaching, especially the use of information about pupils' progress, and challenging teachers to improve when necessary, establishing closer links between the quality of teaching, the school's performance and pay
- making better provision for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs by ensuring that these pupils are identified more quickly and are given the right support to help them make better progress, including following more closely advice from specialist outside agencies
- creating a more balanced curriculum so that all Year 1 pupils have access to the same activities for more of the time
- providing training for the governing body on its roles and responsibilities so that it does more to hold other leaders to account
- ensuring that leaders use additional government funding to support the pupils for whom it is earmarked.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 September 2013

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector (HMI) observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of staff, pupils, parents and carers, a representative of the local authority, and the Chair and members of the Interim Executive Board. He took account of the 35 responses to Parent View on the Ofsted website. He observed seven lessons, four jointly with the headteacher, across all of the classes. He observed an assembly and looked at pupils' work.

The recommendation from the January 2013 inspection about assessing risks was fully dealt with at the first monitoring inspection and was not, therefore, focused on this time.

Context

Two of the three classes are taught by new teachers this term. The school is considering entering a hard federation, which is a formal joint working arrangement, with two other local schools. It is likely to consult formally on this later in the term. Soon after the first monitoring inspection, the governing body was replaced by an interim executive board. There are no pupils entitled to pupil premium funding.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The underachievement of pupils noted in the January 2013 inspection leaves a clear legacy. Pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 are still attaining at levels below those they should be reaching, particularly in writing and mathematics.

For example, in a well-taught Year 2 mathematics lesson, pupils' understanding of right angles and shape was still below where it should be. They needed frequent reminders of basic shape properties. Last year's Year 2 pupils underachieved, reaching below-average levels in the national assessments in English and mathematics. There is much still to do to bring up pupils' attainment and to avoid the same thing happening again this year. The new teacher in Year 2 has rightly identified some key gaps in her pupils' learning in mathematics and English which she is seeking to address. The current Year 1 class also did not achieve as well as they should have done in Reception and did not reach the local authority average attainment.

There are, however, also some very positive recent developments. Pupils' understanding of phonics, linking letters and sounds, has come on in leaps and bounds in the last few months. The current Year 2 pupils reached above-average standards in their phonics screening test towards the end of their time in Year 1. In

a lesson observed, they showed good understanding of the 'ire' sound, correctly reading, using and spelling words such as 'spire' and 'bonfire'. In a Year 1 science lesson about sight and vision, pupils enjoyed themselves and learned well, showing good understanding and the ability to reason. The lesson was practical and very engaging.

There is no evidence that pupils who have special educational needs, or those who show particularly strong capability, are faring any better or worse than the other pupils.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has improved since the January 2013 inspection but remains of mixed quality. Some of the best teaching is in Year 2. Staff have adeptly organised activities which show pupils how to work together well but without constantly stopping the flow of the lessons with niggling reminders about behaviour. Work set in this class is generally appropriate to the different needs of the pupils. However, this could be sharpened further by linking the work set directly to assessments made of the pupils and their learning targets.

In Year 1, the new teacher has quickly established good and positive relationships with the pupils. She explains things clearly and pupils enjoy their learning. Parents and carers are very pleased about this. However, in a Year 1 English lesson observed, the work set was poorly planned and inadequately matched to the needs of the pupils, who made very little progress. This requires urgent attention, as these pupils are already a little way behind where they should be.

In the Reception class, children have settled well. However, similarly to the English lesson in Year 1, the activities for the children are not sharply enough planned to take their learning forward quickly.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

This continues to be a happy school. Pupils behave kindly towards each other and play well together. They feel safe and well looked after. They showed great respect for prayers said by their peers in a well-led assembly. The attendance of most pupils is good so far this year.

Reception children and Year 1 pupils behaved well in the lessons observed. They were usually interested in their learning, although some pupils became distracted in the weaker English lesson seen in Year 1.

Year 2 pupils themselves said that they felt behaviour in lessons was improving but that sometimes pupils 'don't know what to do'. Their teacher is addressing this by actively guiding and teaching her pupils about how to increase their concentration spans and to work more productively with others. For example, in a Year 2 history

lesson, pupils carried out an interesting task, deciding which facts about the Great Fire of London were most significant. They did this in pairs, carefully chosen by the class teacher, and they learned from each other, showed respect for each other's views, and all reached agreement.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The headteacher has continued to take great strides in setting a clear vision for the school and managing and developing the school to best meet this vision. The re-organisation into three classes, the development of the curriculum across all subjects using the local area as a key resource, and the appointment of a new special educational needs coordinator, with a clear remit, are all examples of positive progress. Staff work together closely, with clearly identified roles and responsibilities.

These changes, understandably, have taken some time to achieve. Together with the possibility of federation, they give a firm basis for future improvement. The headteacher knows that further improvements in teaching and pupils' attainment must now very quickly follow. She also recognises that the school over-focused on settling the pupils this term rather than ensuring the teaching was sharp right from the outset. These two things are compatible. In the lessons she observed jointly with HMI, she noted the strengths and weaknesses in the teaching very accurately. Her key priority in the next few months is to assure consistently high-quality teaching, day after day, especially in English and mathematics, so that all pupils make faster progress. This will be the principal focus of the next monitoring inspection. The school's well-written strategic action plan provides a useful framework for this but the proof will be in better outcomes for the pupils.

The new special educational needs coordinator has put in place much more sophisticated and robust systems to support pupils as needed. However, these are at a very early stage and there is no significant impact yet on pupils' learning. Again, the proof will be in the outcomes for the pupils concerned.

Parents and carers are justifiably supportive of the changes made by the headteacher and they give useful practical support to the school. They appreciate the much-improved information the school provides, including the redeveloped website. Events for parents and carers, such as an evening meeting about phonics teaching during this monitoring inspection, are well supported. Parents and carers know, too, that pupils are not all doing as well as they should in English and mathematics and rightly hope for, and expect, improvement.

The governance of the school has improved markedly through the perceptive and well-organised work of the new interim executive board. The headteacher's reports to the board are well organised, informative and useful. In a few areas, however, these reports overestimate the progress made by the school so far. The board's Chair is particularly good at making sure its members do not just take information or judgements from the school as read but always seek additional evidence to support

them. Rightly, the interim executive board has discussed how it can link its members' visits to the school more closely to the school's strategic action plan.

External support

The local authority continues to provide astute support and advice, and has evaluated the school appropriately. Rightly, it has separated its support and monitoring functions, and this has helped make its work incisive. Its lead officer for the school realises the importance of offering continued significant support and advice to the school to deal with the issues raised in this report.