

Serco Inspections
20 Colmore Circus Queensway
Birmingham
B4 6AT

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T: 0121 679 9158
Direct email: rachel.dayan@serco.com

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Ms Zoe Mathie
Interim Headteacher
Featherstone Wood Primary School
Featherston Road
Stevenage
Hertfordshire
SG2 9PP

Dear Ms Mathie

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of Featherstone Wood Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 12 November 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 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 third monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in month and year. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is not making enough 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 third monitoring inspection on 12 November 2013

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector met with the interim headteacher, the acting deputy headteacher, pupils, a group of seven governors and a representative from the local authority. The school's action plan was scrutinised. The focus for this inspection was pupils' achievement in mathematics. To gather evidence HMI observed teaching of the subject in Years 2, 3, 4 and 5 jointly with the acting deputy, looked at provision for numeracy in the Early Years Foundation Stage, met with the subject leader, checked the school's data and looked at work in pupils' books. The school's records for the safe recruitment and vetting of new staff were checked.

Context

A new interim headteacher took over in September. The acting deputy, new to the school this term, has been appointed as the substantive headteacher from January 2014. Two teachers left the school in July and have been replaced. The Chair of the Governing Body is new this term as are most other governors.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Since the previous section 5 inspection last December, the school has suffered from high turnover of staff particularly at senior leadership level. A different senior leadership team has led the school each term and the majority of governors are new. The frequency of these changes has hampered the rate of improvement towards the school's removal from serious weaknesses. For example, a full and comprehensive evaluation of the school's work over the period since the school's previous inspection has not been undertaken. While progress is evident in improving teaching and pupils' achievement in literacy, there is no discernible impact in raising standards in mathematics.

The appointment of a substantive headteacher from next term provides potential stability. The school is not in a position to recruit a permanent deputy. In the meantime, the process of appointing a permanent assistant headteacher to strengthen the leadership team is underway. The previous temporary senior leadership team ensured that systems were quickly put in place to assess accurately the levels pupils had reached and to monitor their subsequent progress carefully. Systems for gathering information and checking for progress are very effective and accessible to all staff and governors. Monitoring of teaching and learning is frequent.

Useful local authority advisory support for the literacy subject leader strengthened her leadership skills, enabling her to lead staff training and contribute effectively to school improvement work at a senior level. This has been successful in improving teaching and accelerating pupils' progress in reading. Most pupils in all year groups

made better than expected progress during the last school year. An injection of a wide range of good-quality books and reorganisation of the library stock has contributed to the school's success in promoting reading and raising achievement. The first release of 2013 national data for Year 2 and Year 6 indicate that attainment in reading is in line with national averages. Most pupils made reasonable progress in writing across the school during the last school year. Their skills in using punctuation and grammar proficiently and spelling accurately are weak. To tackle weaknesses in spelling leaders have taken appropriate action to develop teachers' skills and competence in teaching phonics (letters and sounds), especially in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1.

Leaders and managers have not secured improvement in pupils' achievement in mathematics. Standards are generally in line with the national average in Key Stage 1 but they remain static year-on-year. Standards in Year 6 last year were unacceptably low with pupils leaving the school ill-prepared for the next stage of their education. The subject is suffering from inherent weaknesses in leadership over time. A new leader has taken over this term. She has quickly made changes to improve the quality and consistency of teaching. For example, the revised calculation policy provides detailed information on the development of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division with useful examples and clear, helpful advice for teachers. However, the subject does not have a sufficiently high profile in the school's action plan. The plan does not identify who is going to monitor and evaluate how well the school is doing at prescribed intervals to ensure that improvement is rapid and sustained.

Governance has been strengthened with new recruits currently familiarising themselves with the school. The committee structure has been changed to make it more efficient. Rightly, monitoring teaching and learning is the governing body's priority. Some (but not all) governors have a full understanding of the school's data to enable them to ask searching questions about teaching and pupils' achievement. The governing body is supportive of the school but governors do not have sufficient evidence from visits to observe the school's work at first hand to form an independent view of its performance.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Teachers' performance is managed well with high expectations for improvement, support and training and an expectation that improvement will follow. Inadequate teaching is tackled effectively.
- Improved staff morale is contributing to improvements in teaching.
- Pupils' handwriting and the presentation of their work are improving.
- Pupils' better behaviour and attitudes to learning ensure that lessons proceed without interruption.
- There is marked improvement in pupils' attendance and a reduction in those who are persistent absentees.

- Parents and carers are becoming more involved in the school's activities and in supporting their children's learning at home.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Some teaching remains inadequate and not enough is good.
- Interventions to boost the learning of pupils who have free school meals or are looked after by the local authority are not leading to their better achievement in Key Stage 2. The gap between their achievement and others is not narrowing quickly enough despite the extra funding received from the government to support these pupils.
- Some disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are not making sufficient progress.
- Too many pupils in Years 1 and 2 are not reaching the expected standard in phonics.
- Deadlines are not tight enough in the school's development plan.

External support

The local authority provides a variety of suitable support for the school and fulfils its duty to monitor the school's progress. It has assisted in brokering temporary arrangements for key leadership and forming a useful partnership with a successful local school. The governing body has been supported in the process of appointing the new headteacher and benefits from governor training organised by the local authority.