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12 December 2013

Mrs Janet Conley  
Headteacher  
St Finbar's Catholic Primary School  
South Hill Road  
Liverpool  
Merseyside  
L8 9RY

Dear Mrs Conley

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of St Finbar's Catholic Primary School**

Following my visit with Paul Latham, Additional Inspector, to your school on 10 and 11 December 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 February 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.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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, the Director of Children's Services for Liverpool and to the Diocese.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least consistently good by:
  - ensuring that teachers use information about how well pupils are doing to plan work which meets the needs of all learners
  - ensuring that teachers' marking and feedback always give clear guidance to pupils about what they need to do to improve their work
  - ensuring teachers have high expectations about the standard and amount of work that pupils should produce, and by making sure that there is a good level of challenge for more-able pupils
  - sharing good practice in teaching, and providing targeted support for teachers to improve their practice.
  
- Ensure that pupils make at least good progress in English and mathematics, especially between Years 3 and 6, so that their attainment rises by:
  - checking the progress of individuals and groups of pupils regularly and robustly, so that leaders and teachers can take swift action to address any underachievement
  - providing more opportunities for pupils to practise their skills and solve problems in mathematics
  - providing more opportunities for pupils to write for a range of different purposes, and to produce longer pieces of writing in English and other subjects.
  
- Improve attendance, particularly of those pupils who do not attend regularly enough, by:
  - consolidating the recently introduced strategies
  - ensuring that all pupils and parents have a clear understanding of the importance of coming to school.
  
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels, including governance, in driving rapid improvements by:
  - ensuring, as a matter of urgency, that the school has well-qualified, experienced and permanent staff at senior leadership level and that their roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
  - ensuring that the school's improvement plans contain actions and ways of measuring success that are closely linked to improvements in pupils' achievement
  - using systems for monitoring teachers' performance to set all teachers clear targets and expected outcomes
  - ensuring that governors have the information they need to be able to hold school leaders to account for the school's performance.

## **Report on the second monitoring inspection on 10 and 11 December 2013.**

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, four governors, including the Chair of the Governing Body and the headteacher mentor. In addition, discussions were held with groups of pupils, parents and representatives from the diocese as well as the local authority. Lessons were observed in every class in the school alongside several other teaching sessions. Learning walks, accompanied by a senior leader, were used to observe phonics (the teaching of letters and the sounds they make) and guided reading sessions. The majority of the lesson observations were joint observations with members of the senior leadership team. Pupils were also heard reading and a selection of books were scrutinised to determine how well pupils were learning over time and how they were developing their literacy skills in the context of other subjects.

### **Context**

Despite having a full complement of staff at the start of this academic year, staffing turbulence has continued to plague the school and has delayed more rapid improvement. Four teachers, including most of the middle managers in the school, are absent long-term. Some of these absences are close to resolution and it is hoped that two new teachers can be appointed for the start of term in January. An interim deputy headteacher has taken up post for the 2013-14 academic year and is on secondment from a good local school. A new Chair of the Governing Body has also recently been appointed.

### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

There is an improving picture of achievement. However, the progress pupils are making is inconsistent. On-going, long-term staff absence in several classes is severely restricting the progress made in these classes. Too many pupils are falling behind, especially in their reading and writing and are having to catch-up in later classes. Overall attainment remains below the national average across both Key Stage 1 and 2. However, for the first time in four years the school in 2013 has surpassed the government's current floor standard, which sets out the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress. Pupils in Year 6 made very good progress in reading, writing and mathematics with virtually all pupils making expected progress and almost half the pupils making more than expected progress in comparison to their peers nationally. However, few pupils attain the higher levels. At Key Stage 1, outcomes were less evident. Attainment improved but remained below the national average. Similarly, there was an improvement in the phonics screening test, although this was still well below the national average. The gap

between those pupils receiving additional government funding through the pupil premium and their classmates is being narrowed with an increase in the number of these pupils achieving the expected standard by the time they leave school. While this improvement is to be celebrated, it is recognised by the school that this has been as a result of intensive intervention strategies intended to make up for the patchy progress in some classes. Current data, shows that a similar level of intervention will be required, at least for this year.

The assessment of pupils in the Early Years Foundation Stage is unreliable and does not provide a clear picture of attainment on entry or the progress the younger children make. The school has recognised this and is working with local authority support to improve the consistency of this assessment. Currently, pupils are entering Key Stage 1 with skills below those expected nationally, especially in their reading, writing and number skills.

Recovery remains fragile and poor literacy skills remain a major concern. Spelling, punctuation and grammar are particularly weak and preventing many pupils from expressing themselves well through their writing.

### **The quality of teaching**

Teaching still requires improvement. There is too much variability across the school and across subjects which is exacerbated by ongoing staff turbulence. Provision remains weak in those classes where there is frequent staff absence. Currently, there is not enough consistently good teaching across all classes to ensure improvement is sustainable. If the staffing situation is not resolved, as a matter of urgency, the school will continue to rely on better teaching in some classes and intensive intervention strategies to enable pupils to catch-up.

The school leadership team has ensured that a range of non-negotiable policies are in place to make certain that the teaching of reading, phonics and mathematical calculation is consistent across classes. This is beginning to have an impact. Pupils are noticing positive changes around the school. For example, each classroom now has a dedicated reading corner, books are clearly marked according to reading age and ability and parents can access an on-line library (BUG Club) from home to enable them to support their children's reading. This is still new and underutilised. Currently, not enough parents support their children's reading.

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, teaching is not uniformly good. For example, when children are outside, and involved in child-initiated activities, staff are not sufficiently engaging with them. As a result, children do not make the progress they should in their physical and social development nor in their language and communication. Some boys are disregarding activities prepared for them leading to poorer behaviour. Expectations of what children can achieve are not always sufficiently high.

The teaching of phonics has had to be extended into Key Stage 2 from September 2013, reflecting the poor reading skills of a number of pupils, especially in Years 3 and 4. This is a legacy of poor teaching in previous years. The teaching of phonics continues to be inconsistent and is dependent on the training the adult working with them has received. It is currently better taught in Key Stage 1 where it has been established for longer. Guided reading also varies across sessions. As with the teaching of phonics, groups receive different quality teaching, depending on the which adult is with them. The use and deployment of learning support assistants are also inconsistent.

Currently, teaching does not promote the development of literacy skills across the curriculum well. Where teachers are confident and knowledgeable in the topic they are teaching and have access to good resources, they are able to plan a succession of lessons which build up pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding. This was observed in a good geography lesson, where pupils were using their previous learnt knowledge and photographs to investigate life in Mysore in preparation for a discussion about whether information and communication technology companies should, or should not, be allowed to locate their enterprise in the city. The teacher had clearly planned a sequence of lessons which built up pupils' understanding and knowledge of India and enabled them to write confidently about aspects of life in that country. Similarly, in another class, the study of life in Britain during the Second World War was based around a sequence of lessons and practical activities which provide pupils with an insight into what life was like at the time and enabled them to write confidently and at length about what they had learnt. As a result, their work was of a high quality. Generally, however, tasks in many subjects outside literacy lessons, are set at a low level and do not encourage good quality writing. For example, in too many science lessons pupils would complete an experiment and tabulate the information but were not expected to write at any length recounting what they had done or seek to explain their findings. Also, in these subjects, too many pupils are expected to complete the same work irrespective of their ability. Pupils did talk positively about greater access to outside classroom experiences. For example, during the inspection, Year 3 visited a museum to look at Egyptian artefacts. This and other visits provide a rich context which support improvements in literacy where pupils can use these first-hand experiences to enrich their writing.

In those classes which had a regular teacher, marking was clear and informative, particularly in their literacy and mathematics books, however, this is not yet consistent across all classes or subjects.

## **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

Behaviour around the school is improving. Pupils and parents were clear that this was an aspect of the school which was getting better. The visible and regular presence of adults both outside and inside the school, particularly at break-times and lunchtimes has had a positive impact on misbehaviour. Pupils are adamant that bullying is very infrequent and there is a general consensus that there is a more caring ethos around the school. 'We learn to care for each other' and 'we need to look after each other' were common statements expressed to inspectors. Pupils took pride in explaining how older children acted as 'buddies' to younger ones in the playground.

Behaviour and attitudes in lessons vary from class to class. Pupils identified that there was poorer behaviour in some classes, particularly when the regular teacher was absent. Most pupils are keen to learn and when stimulated become engrossed in their work. This was evidenced during a mathematics lesson where pupils were solving problems. When the teacher asked them to stop because they had to start another lesson, a collective groan arose because they were enjoying and were stimulated by the work. However, in too many lessons, the work is not made interesting enough and disruption can occur. This is especially noticeable lower down the school where poorly developed social skills meant that too many pupils cannot sit still on seats and there is too much shouting out when the teacher asks questions. This is not necessarily malicious but reflects a lack of basic self-discipline. However, it does disrupt the flow of lessons and pupils learn less.

In too many lessons, pupils are still too dependent on the teacher to guide them to the answer rather than develop their own ideas. As a result, they may appear to be achieving but are not necessarily learning. This makes it difficult for them when they sit tests or examinations and have to think for themselves.

Attendance is improving but is still below the national average. A number of strategies, such as a first day call to parents when a child is absent, as well as incentives for pupils, such as weekly rewards to the winning class are helping to improve attendance. Persistent absenteeism is also reducing, but more slowly. Safeguarding requirements are in place and are secure.

## **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

The school culture is slowly being changed from one of decline to being more upbeat. 'The school is a lot better than it was' was a comment from one pupil which echoed the thoughts of others. A well-balanced, hardworking and dedicated senior leadership team is now in place. There is a clear vision of where they want the school to be. There is also a realism that there is still a long way to go and they

have identified and are addressing areas of weakness, such as the insecure assessment in several parts of the school. They have implemented a series of improvements to ensure greater consistency in procedure and practice across the school, for example, with policies for phonics, reading and mathematical calculation. Managers and the local authority are aware of the shortcomings in the Early Years Foundation Stage and are providing guidance and external support. For example, the role of key workers is being re-established and guidance on making assessment more secure is also being provided.

The biggest problem that continues to hold back the school is the long-term absence of a number of staff. Currently, there is no middle management structure since most of these are the absentees. Until these staffing issues are resolved, inconsistencies in provision will continue to plague the school. Management, governors and the local authority are working hard to resolve the situation and have not shirked from making some difficult decisions, which in the short-term are adding to staffing volatility.

Although inconsistencies continue to hold back the pace of change, the school is showing signs of improvement and this is acknowledged by both pupils and parents. There is greater rigour in terms of monitoring classroom performance, not only through more frequent lesson observations but also through planning and work scrutiny. More robust assessment of individual pupil's needs has resulted in a reduction in the number of pupils on the special educational needs register. Weaknesses in the teaching of phonics and reading are being addressed through more personalised training, mentoring and support. Regular pupil progress meetings are helping to identify pupils who may need additional support at an earlier stage. However, staff absence means that it is not yet as affective as it could be. There has been a restructuring of the curriculum in preparation for new requirements in September 2014. Subjects are being taught more discretely, particularly in Key Stage 2. However, the development of some subjects will continue to be delayed by on-going staff absence.

Communication between the school and parents is improving. Relationships are generally positive and parents remark that they are better informed about what is happening in the school through regular newsletters. They remarked that the headteacher is very approachable and there is an open door policy to encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education.

Governance has been strengthened by several new appointments to the governing body, who are well informed about educational matters. These include a serving headteacher from an outstanding school in a nearby local authority. A review of governance was completed recently and judged the spread of skills and competencies across the governing body to be good. A monitoring group, which includes governors, local authority representatives and school leaders, meets regularly to discuss issues and monitor the progress the school is making to escape

being in special measures. Recent governing body meetings have been more challenging than previously, with pertinent questions being asked about staffing, finance and data.

The capacity and willingness to move the school forward is clearly evident but is being held back by, as yet, unresolved staffing difficulties.

### **External support**

The local authority, in partnership with the diocese, has been very pro-active in providing a wide range of support for the school, including continuing professional development, personnel advice from the School Employment Advisory Team and brokerage of support and staffing from other schools. An interim deputy headteacher has been seconded to the school for a year to develop monitoring, the curriculum and teaching and learning, alongside providing additional support for the headteacher. A headteacher mentor from a local authority school provides regular and valuable advice particularly on staffing and strategy. Consultants from the local authority continue to work with subject leaders in English and mathematics to develop their leadership and monitoring skills. Local authority advisers regularly visit the school to discuss the progress that is being made and to participate in monitoring group meetings. Advice is being provided in the Early Years Foundation Stage by a quality improvement officer to raise the profile of the nursery, where numbers are low. In addition, training and support are being provided to develop more consistent and accurate use of data. Personnel from the local authority are working with school governors and the headteacher to resolve the on-going staffing problems. It is hoped that two permanent teacher appointments can be made for January 2014. If that is not the case, the local authority is prepared to broker further experienced support for the school from within the local learning partnership to ensure greater staffing stability. In addition, every term, the local authority conducts a detailed and extensive review of provision throughout the school, which identifies strengths and weaknesses as well as where progress has been made. This informs how plans need to be adjusted to tackle areas of underperformance. The local authority has committed to providing this extensive and valuable support in the immediate and foreseeable future.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- It is paramount that, as a matter of urgency, staffing is stabilised in order that pupils in the school have minimal disruption to their education in the future and there are no further delays in driving through improvements.