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Max Vlahakis and Angela Hill
Interim headteachers
Butts Primary School
Butts Road
Walsall
West Midlands
WS4 2AH

Dear Mr Vlahakis and Mrs Hill

Special measures monitoring inspection of Butts Primary School

Following my visit with Dr Rashida Sharif, Additional Inspector, to your school on 5 and 6 February 2014, 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 May 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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose

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 and the Director of Children's Services for Walsall.

Yours sincerely
Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve teaching so that it is good in all years by:
 - raising the expectations of staff about what pupils of all abilities are capable of achieving
 - making sure that teachers' assessments are accurate and used to plan work that is closely matched to pupils' needs and capabilities
 - making sure that lessons engage all pupils' interest particularly during the main teaching sections
 - training teachers to use probing questions during lessons to assess pupils' understanding and to use the information to adapt their teaching
 - ensuring that teachers mark in enough detail to give pupils precise guidance on what they have done well and how to improve their work
 - further ensuring that all staff are skilled in managing pupils' behaviour and follow the school's discipline code consistently
 - ensuring the continuity and quality of lesson planning, particularly when pupils are taught by different adults, so that their learning proceeds smoothly.

- Raise pupils' achievement by:
 - ensuring that the needs of pupils supported by pupil premium funding, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs are accurately assessed and that they receive effective support to help them learn well
 - improving the teaching of reading, particularly in Years 2 to 5, so that pupils gain a deeper level of understanding and knowledge about the books they read and read widely in school and at home
 - giving pupils regular opportunities to practise their basic skills in writing and mathematics in a range of subjects and to develop their skills in using mathematics to solve problems
 - ensuring pupils always present their work neatly and use good handwriting skills
 - increasing attendance to at least average for all groups of pupils.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - establishing a regular programme of meetings with teachers to discuss the progress of the pupils that they teach and to identify ways of tackling underachievement
 - using the most effective teachers to support their colleagues through coaching and by demonstrating good practice
 - training all leaders fully in analysing and using information about pupils' progress to pinpoint areas of strength and weakness
 - training leaders to use lesson observation, work scrutiny and the analysis of assessment data to evaluate the school's performance accurately and to identify precise actions that will raise pupils' achievement and improve teaching and learning
 - securing the services of an experienced and effective school leader to support and guide the senior leadership team.

- Improve the governance of the school by:
 - making sure that governors receive regular and frank updates on pupils' progress and the quality of teaching
 - training governors to challenge leaders about the performance of the school, including the impact of pupil premium spending on pupils' achievement
 - ensuring that the arrangements for managing teachers' performance are robust and are closely monitored by the governing body
 - following the recommendations of the local authority's review of governance, which is currently under way.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 5-6 February 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and held discussions with the interim headteachers, subject leaders, pupils, parents and carers, the Chair of the Governing Body and vice chair, the local authority school improvement advisor, and the local authority English manager who is supporting the school's middle leadership.

Context

The substantive headteacher returned to lead the school in November but was absent because of illness through much of January 2014, and has now left the school. The headteacher and deputy headteacher of Alumwell Junior School reduced their support to the school on the substantive headteacher's return, but are now once again sharing the roles of interim headteachers at Butts Primary School. The governing bodies of Butts and Alumwell have provisionally agreed to begin the process of federating the two schools.

One teacher has left the school and been replaced by another since the first monitoring inspection. A further teacher has been on long-term sick leave and the class has been taught by temporary staff.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Considerable attention has been given to increasing the accuracy of teacher assessments of pupils' attainment and progress, through internal and external moderation activities. These data indicate that Year 6 pupils are well on course to achieve higher results in their end-of-Key Stage 2 assessments in reading, writing and mathematics than those in 2013. Such improvement is confirmed strongly in pupils' books and also in lessons, where the pupils regularly show exceptional enthusiasm for learning and a real thirst for knowledge. Elsewhere, there are marked variations in rates of pupils' progress which are linked closely to the quality of teaching. In the Reception class, children make excellent progress in the early development of their writing, because of the close attention given to the development of their technical skills alongside the promotion of a love of songs, stories and poems. This continues into Year 1. In most classes, standards of presentation and handwriting have improved sharply, but this is not consistent. For example in Year 3, pupils' progress is slow and writing standards have declined as the class has experienced several changes of teacher.

In most classes, pupils now have more opportunities to practise their writing to a good standard in a range of subjects. This is less the case for mathematics. Pupils have sound calculation skills and a secure understanding of aspects of shape and space. However in some classes pupils, including the more able, are not challenged sufficiently to apply their number skills in solving problems, either in mathematics

lessons or in other subjects. Pupils' attainment in reading compares favourably with the national average across all phases, and their progress has been supported by a considerable investment in new books and resources.

The support for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs has strengthened through the sharper assessment of their needs and systematic planning of provision for each individual. Pupils eligible for support from the pupil premium performed well in comparison to their peers in the school in mathematics and reading in the 2013 Year 6 national tests. Leaders are aware of the need to strengthen methods for accounting for the impact of programmes to support the achievement of these pupils across the school.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching varies widely across the school. Outstanding teaching was seen in some classes on this inspection, but the majority of teaching was less than good and a very small minority was inadequate. Observations of teaching recently undertaken by school leaders, supported by local authority personnel, were generally more favourable but still reflect these wide variations between classes. The most prevalent weakness which prevents teaching from getting to good is in planning activities which help all groups of pupils to build on what they already know, understand and can do. Lesson plans are often insufficiently explicit in setting out how this will be done. Too often, pupils – especially the more able – spend too long completing low-level, routine tasks and do not move their learning forward to undertake more demanding activities. Lessons in Year 6 stand in stark contrast to this picture; here pupils are constantly challenged to apply their skills in increasingly complex problems and scenarios. The teaching in Year 6 is particularly effective in finding out how much pupils understand as the lesson proceeds and adapting lesson activities to ensure that pupils make at least good progress.

Aspects of teaching have improved in a number of regards since the previous full inspection. In most classes, pupils' books are regularly marked with very helpful comments showing them what has gone well and what needs to improve. Pupils do not always respond, however, to the teachers' comments by correcting or improving their work. Teachers' questioning of pupils in whole-class discussions is now a strength in the majority of classes, particularly in directing questions and pitching them at a level which ensures the full involvement of pupils across the attainment range. Teaching assistants often provide skilful support in teaching individuals and small groups, but the extent to which the teacher ensures that they are deployed to best effect throughout lessons varies markedly between classes.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils and parents and carers expressed positive views about improvements in staff management of pupils' behaviour since the last inspection. Pupils mostly have positive attitudes to learning, and respond well to the increasingly engaging activities planned by teachers in most classes. For example, pupils in Year 2 were captivated

by a morning session with local fire officers; this session was very well designed to link to pupils' topic work on the Great Fire of London as well as their understanding of public services and personal safety. Where pupils are given low-level, undemanding tasks, though, some work at a slow pace, and become disengaged and restless. In a small number of instances, teachers raise their voices to be heard above the class chatter and noise levels consequently rise to distracting levels.

Pupils' attendance has improved very markedly. It has now been made clear to families that term-time absence, including for holidays, is not acceptable. Good attendance is given a high profile, both in the communications with parents, such as the newsletter, and through the reinvigorated and much-valued school rewards system. Pupils' attendance and punctuality are now rigorously monitored by a parent support adviser who liaises quickly with families where pupils' attendance is a cause for concern.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The interim headteachers have provided very skilful and flexible support and guidance during a period of considerable instability in the school's substantive leadership. This has helped to maintain continuity in the approaches to school improvement set in place after the previous full inspection. Their priorities have been to: improve pupils' achievement across the school by accurately measuring their progress; identify and eliminate inadequate teaching; increase the proportion of good teaching; improve the teaching and learning environment and resources by, for example, having more classrooms rather than open-plan areas; ensure that pupils attend regularly; and improve the general ethos of the school through, for example, more school clubs and sport activities, and better communications with parents and carers. In all of these areas, robust action has been taken and successes can be identified. Senior leaders formally hold pupil progress meetings with teachers to account for pupils' achievement, and teachers are now holding individual 'conferences' with all of their pupils to identify how they can improve. Such meetings help pupils and staff alike to focus on ensuring that good progress is made. Further action is now rightly being taken to support and improve the effectiveness of middle leadership in monitoring and developing pupils' progress and the quality of teaching, as a means of strengthening the capacity to improve across the school.

The quality of improvement planning, and evaluation of progress against these plans, have improved very substantially since the first monitoring inspection. Evaluations of progress are now regular and rigorous, setting out what has not been achieved as well as the successes. That these evaluations have been sharpened reflects a transformation in the effectiveness of the governing body. The smaller, reconstituted governing body has demonstrated very considerable commitment to improving the school through frequent meetings above and beyond those in the regular scheduled cycle. It is making good progress through the action plan which had been put in place following the local authority's review of governance. It now offers measured but systematic challenge to school leaders to account for all aspects of performance, including pupils' performance and the quality of teaching. Governors

have given detailed consideration to the options for the future organisation of the school.

External support

Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the local authority has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose. It now complies with requirements to assess the scope for the school to be closed with an analysis of surplus places in better performing local schools and to identify how it will inform parents and carers about the actions planned for the school. Importantly, it now incorporates far more realistic timescales in its actions for improvement, enabling evaluations of progress to be more balanced.

External support has been deployed very effectively. The interim headteachers brought in from Alumwell Junior School have facilitated links between teachers and leaders to enable Butts Primary School staff to see and share effective practice in Alumwell and a local teachers' network. The local authority has given valuable and effective support to the school's substantive and interim leadership, for example: in carrying out regular reviews of school performance, teaching and governance; in intensive sessions to improve the school's middle leadership capacity; and in advice and support on complex matters of staff employment and performance.