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20 March 2014

Mrs S Best
Headteacher
Little Marlow CofE School
School Lane
Marlow
SL7 3SA

Dear Mrs Best

Special measures monitoring inspection of Little Marlow CofE School

Following my visit with Sian Thornton, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 18–19 March 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 third 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.

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 Buckinghamshire and 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.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 18 and 19 March 2014

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and assistant headteacher, members of staff, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board, parents and carers, and a representative from the local authority. They observed several lessons, some jointly with the headteacher, playtimes and an act of worship. They evaluated key school documents, including school plans, evaluations, and governing body minutes.

The recommendation about safeguarding pupils was fully dealt with by the time of the first monitoring inspection, so is not reported on here. However, Her Majesty's Inspectors spoke with the headteacher about safeguarding and checked key documentation.

Context

In February 2014, a new assistant headteacher, who teaches the Reception class, joined the school. The school has no pupils entitled to the support from additional funding.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils are making better progress in English and mathematics across the school. They are often articulate and confident. When the teaching allows them full scope to think deeply, pupils take these opportunities with alacrity. For example, in an interesting discussion about fairness in Year 2, a pupil contributed very thoughtfully, 'It is not always fair to treat everyone equally, or the same.' Then he explained his reasons carefully.

On the other hand, pupils' achievement is limited when the teaching is not well matched to their existing understanding. In a mathematics lesson, despite having already clearly shown that they could double numbers, pupils were sent off to do a task on this that was well within their capabilities. One pupil remarked understandably to the headteacher, who was present, 'This is easy.' In another lesson, in English, pupils all carried out the same writing task in the same way, without enough consideration of what they already could do. For some, this was too hard. One pupil only managed to make a very brief start after writing the date before time was up. Scrutiny of his work over time shows that he has too rarely completed writing tasks.

Overall, pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics is more rapid than it was previously. Pupils write with greater accuracy and interest, using improving grammar. They take pride in their work, which is often neatly presented, with letters

and numbers being correctly formed. Pupils demonstrate further improving knowledge of phonics. The school's useful information, and the pupils' work, show that many pupils are catching up previous underachievement. However, while many pupils are now on track, overall attainment in English and mathematics remains below where it should be. The headteacher is well aware of this.

There is no evidence that any group of pupils (such as boys or girls) achieves any better or worse than others.

Pupils show much interest in subjects beyond English and mathematics but inspection evidence indicates that their attainment in these subjects is too low. For example, in a Year 1 science lesson, pupils did not learn much that was new to them about how ice melts, or what may speed this process up. In Year 2, pupils have enjoyed interesting topic work on fair trade, but some opportunities to deepen their understanding (for example, by more detailed geographical work on the countries involved, or looking at the scientific process of crop growth) have not been taken.

The quality of teaching

Teaching has improved since the last monitoring inspection and has become of a more consistent quality across the school. However, the improvement is steady rather than rapid or dramatic, and there is still much to be done. The local authority made its own review of teaching in December 2013. The findings of this review are similar to the evidence found by Her Majesty's Inspectors at this monitoring inspection, namely that:

- teachers' expectations of what pupils can do are rising but not yet high enough
- work is not always set at the correct level for individual pupils, so it can be too easy or too difficult
- teachers do not always identify precisely what they want the pupils to learn and, then, what activities will be most suitable to support that learning; pupils sometimes, therefore, experience interesting tasks which nevertheless do not help them to learn rapidly enough or practise their skills
- pupils try hard to do what the teachers ask of them; their relationships with staff are positive
- marking of pupils' work has improved but is of mixed quality; pupils do not always respond to teachers' marking comments by improving their work
- questioning by teachers does not develop or stretch pupils' thinking in sufficient depth; in some lessons, pupils do not have enough opportunities to think about or discuss their work and learning
- the work of teaching assistants in lessons is more sharply focused and effective; these staff are better prepared and often make particularly strong contributions to the learning and progress of pupils.

It is now most important that the school takes firmer action to improve the teaching, drawing on expertise from outside the school, as needed.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils behave well and show interest in their learning. The work carried out by the Year 2 teacher to improve pupils' attitudes to learning and skills has been very successful. Pupils listen carefully and show respect to each other. They work and play together happily. This provides a very good basis for further improvements in their progress and attainment.

As at the last monitoring inspection, pupils engaged fully and behaved respectfully in worship time. One pupil led prayers confidently, using appropriate language independently.

Pupils' attendance is about average so far this school year. The school has introduced more robust processes for supporting the very small number of pupils whose attendance causes concern.

The pupils like the new high-quality climbing equipment installed since the last monitoring inspection. They also behave very well on it. The headteacher succeeded in gaining the funding for this from different sources. This is a vote of confidence in the school, which the pupils themselves realise.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The headteacher has continued to lead change for the better. The school is becoming a more inviting community. A great deal is going on. Parents and carers are made welcome and many contribute usefully to the school. The school's main management systems are carefully thought through and better established. The format for improvement planning is clear and useful. Procedures for checking on the progress made by all pupils are increasingly robust and useful to staff. Adults are firmly committed to improving the school. All teachers are new; they are committed to working as a team.

The new assistant headteacher has started to improve practice within her own class and to learn about the school. The range and scope of the work in her class has helpfully broadened. She and the headteacher have usefully begun to consider how key management roles may be shared amongst the staff. A useful draft structure for this now exists. There is, however, much to do before it comes to fruition. This is now a key priority, as the school must continue to develop its internal capacity to improve. The curriculum, across all subjects, needs to be broadened and deepened. At present, staff do not have the guidance they need to teach all subjects well. In developing this, the school should consider how it can make short-term

improvements (for example, using published materials) which lead to longer-term, school led, developments.

The special educational needs coordinator leads and manages her areas of responsibility well. In particular, she has provided valuable training for teaching assistants. She has astutely sorted out which pupils truly require special educational needs support and which pupils have fallen behind because of weak teaching in the past. These groups are then rightly provided for differently. She is now able to show the impact of her work. The pupils she supports are doing as well as the others.

The headteacher is under no illusion that the quality of teaching across the school is not yet strong or consistent enough. However, despite a programme of regular observations in lessons and scrutiny of pupils' work, the school has no clear summary of what the key strengths and weaknesses in teaching are. Nor is there a structured programme designed to help accelerate the needed improvements. The formal lesson observations made by the headteacher look at what has gone well against a bank of pre-prepared statements, rather than what is most needed, namely checking how well the pupils are learning. This means that her reports to the local authority and Interim Executive Board about teaching lack sharpness.

The Interim Executive Board continues to support the school effectively, and its members ask pertinent questions. However, recently, the Interim Executive Board has tended to accept that the school is improving more quickly than it is. A well-constructed process has been established for the school to reintroduce its own governing body, given that a federation with other local schools is no longer imminent. This is also important as a step towards the school being fully self-managing again. New governors must ensure that they are ready to challenge the school on how well it is doing.

External support

The local authority's focus group, chaired by a senior officer, meets regularly. It checks the school's work closely and provides some sharp and timely advice. The school's adviser provides support which the headteacher much values. It is important that the local authority should continue to broker support for the school, especially from other schools, as needed.

Priorities for further improvement:

- Identify clearly what the most important areas needing improvement in teaching are and put in place quickly a robust procedure for making these improvements; then check carefully that improvements follow.
- Introduce and develop management responsibilities amongst the staff.