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6 June 2014

Mrs Suzanne 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 Matthew Barnes, Seconded Inspector, to your school on 4–5 June 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 fourth 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 Diocese of Oxford and the Director of Children’s Services for Buckinghamshire.

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, 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, challenging teachers to improve when necessary and 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 and ensures that leaders use additional government funding to support the pupils for whom it is earmarked.

Report on the fourth monitoring inspection on 4–5 June 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of staff, parents and carers, pupils, the Chair of the Interim Executive Board and a representative from the local authority as well as the senior leaders of the nearby junior school, with which Little Marlow School is expected to federate. Inspectors observed several lessons, some jointly with the headteacher, and an assembly. They scrutinised pupils' work and evaluated documents including minutes of meetings, data about how much progress pupils are making and school plans.

The recommendation about risk assessment and safeguarding of pupils was fully dealt with at the first monitoring inspection.

Context

Staffing has remained stable since the previous monitoring inspection. The school is formally consulting about forming a hard federation (which would include a shared governing body) with the nearby Church of England junior school. It has no pupils eligible for pupil premium funding.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Across the school, pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics has continued to accelerate, as the quality of teaching in these subjects has become more consistent. In Year 2, more pupils have achieved the higher levels in these subjects. Pupils with special educational needs have improved their learning at a similar rate to others, but the gap between their attainment and that of their peers remains constant.

However, these improvements have been made disproportionately by girls. A gender gap has become more apparent since the previous monitoring inspection in the Reception and Year 1 classes, in both of which girls now notably outperform boys. In Year 2, where the quality of teaching has been more consistently effective throughout the year, boys have done better and the gap between their attainment and that of the girls is much smaller. In mathematics in Year 2, boys now attain slightly better than girls.

Pupils' writing is increasingly accurate and interesting. In Year 1, pupils enjoyed writing instructions. Their writing was legible, with correct letter formation. Most pupils spelt the important words they used correctly, showing their improving knowledge of phonics (linking letters and sounds). Most of the higher-attaining

pupils in the class are girls. In Year 2, in mathematics, pupils succeeded in making up sums (or number sentences) to reach particular answers at increasing levels of complexity. In this useful, open-ended task, lower-attaining pupils worked hard but struggled more than the others when solving the problems without help.

In the foundation subjects, beyond English and mathematics, there are also some improvements, but these are not as rapid as those in English and mathematics. Teachers' expectations of pupils' capabilities in these subjects are not always high enough. This reflects the fact that curriculum planning, although improving, is not yet complete. For example, in a Year 1 music lesson, pupils enjoyed playing steady beat or pulse on instruments, but, in their practical work, many confused beat and rhythm. They were ready to learn about this difference, and about strong and weaker beats, but these opportunities were not clearly provided. Pupils' singing in an assembly was inaccurately pitched and below the standard it should be. The headteacher has rightly identified that pupils' understanding of diversity in society requires some improvement and she has begun to address this.

The quality of teaching

Teaching continues to improve steadily. Many areas needing improvement identified at the last monitoring inspection have developed well. There are fewer occasions when work is too easy or too difficult for pupils. Teachers' questioning of pupils has improved, as has that of teaching assistants. Teachers' marking of pupils' work is much improved. The requirements of pupils with special educational needs are, for the most part, suitably met in lessons. In some lessons, however, teachers spend too long talking with their classes about the learning objectives and giving instructions, which unduly slows the pace of the pupils' learning. In the music lesson referred to earlier, the teacher explained the objectives at length but these were insufficiently challenging, so, in practice, they restricted the pupils' learning. Nevertheless, this lesson had much to commend it; the teacher showed confidence in managing effectively a very practical lesson.

The teaching of phonics is lively and well organised across the school. Pupils of different ages join teaching groups at the right level for them. Across all of these groups, staff use a mixed and successful range of strategies, appropriate to pupils' needs. For example, in one group, pupils learned spelling rules by playing word bingo, while another group were shown effectively how to segment words, namely to find the sounds of particular letters within words.

The teaching and organisation within the Reception class have improved considerably. Children's progress is assessed accurately and these assessments are well used to inform the planning for the next lessons. Staff ask helpful questions to enable children to think better for themselves. However, so far, these improvements are working better for many girls than for most boys. In a whole-class lesson about

measuring length, all of the children who were asked by staff to demonstrate which trees were the tallest and shortest on an interactive whiteboard were girls. Girls received more praise from staff for their behaviour and work than did the boys, even though the boys were trying hard. The clothes provided for dressing up in the class are more suitable and enticing for girls. The increasing gap in attainment between boys and girls in this class has been correctly noted by the headteacher. The class teacher, consequently, has begun to consider strategies to engage boys better. This will be looked at carefully at the next monitoring visit.

Similarly in Year 1, higher-attaining teaching groups are dominated by girls. The class teacher has agreed to check carefully why this is and whether more can be done to enable the boys to show what they are capable of.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils' behaviour continues to improve. Their safety is appropriately watched by staff. Pupils generally work and play together caringly and respectfully, although some parents and carers have raised minor concerns about behaviour. Pupils continue to show clear interest in their learning. They enjoy school and many attend interesting after-school activities, such as sports and gardening clubs.

As in previous monitoring visits, pupils listened respectfully and with interest during a worship assembly, led by the vicar. Again, a pupil led a prayer independently and confidently.

Attendance remains about average. There is notably more absence by boys in the Reception class than by girls. In Years 1 and 2, boys attend slightly better than girls.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The headteacher continues to show strong leadership, giving direction and demonstrating inner strength. She also listens carefully to others before taking decisions. She has considered carefully the issues raised at the last monitoring inspection and has acted fittingly. For instance, she has begun to use the expertise from a local teaching school very usefully. Staff have benefited from this opportunity.

The school evaluates itself accurately. The headteacher is very realistic about what is going well, and not as well. For instance she has noted the emerging issue about gender inequality. The interim executive board continues to ask pertinent and challenging questions of her. However, other key members of staff do not yet report formally to the board. Board members, and those who are shadowing it with a view

to becoming governors in the federation, are learning quickly, as needed. They understand their roles and the needs of the community well. They are aware of most of the key issues that face the school and have planned appropriately for the transfer from the current system of governance to that of the anticipated federation.

The special educational needs co-ordinator continues to be very effective in developing her role. The training she has led for teaching assistants has impacted well on the contribution these staff have made to the improvements in teaching. She is very reflective about the effect of her work and, as a result, sees clearly what can be further improved. She is working usefully with staff from the local junior school. The pupils she supports are progressing as well as the others, but the gap between their attainment and that of others has not yet reduced. Rightly, she sees this as the next challenge. She also picked up on the gender gap developing in Reception and Year 1 and has helpfully begun to ask questions of herself about how it can be reduced.

The school improvement plan is well constructed and supports improvement effectively, especially in respect of the issues about teaching identified at the last monitoring visit.

All teachers, rightly, have whole-school leadership responsibilities. This work is developing, and, as a result, the headteacher now has much better internal support. The assistant headteacher, for instance, has usefully led some initiatives, such as improving the learning environment. However, the specific long-term job description of the assistant headteacher is not yet confirmed. Rightly, the headteacher considers that the new leadership team now needs to move its work up a gear and that further leadership training is needed for staff. The work of the teaching school is useful in this respect. The school's curriculum is now better structured but needs to become deeper and more challenging. Despite its strengths, the school improvement plan is not precise enough about how leadership in the school should develop and in what timescale. Teachers do not yet have specific targets for their whole-school leadership roles within their performance management (appraisal).

The proposed federation with the nearby junior school is being planned appropriately. There is real enthusiasm for it within both schools, building on their existing successful collaboration. There is also frustration about the time it has taken to reach this point, which has delayed aspects of the progress of Little Marlow School.

External support

The local authority continues to support the school well. Its focus group successfully keeps the thinking of all parties involved sharp. The Buckinghamshire Learning Trust, working on behalf of the authority, provides consistently useful advice and

help. It has, for example, brokered the useful support of the teaching school and of local advanced skills teachers.

Priorities for further improvement:

- Ensure that the school's internal leadership structure, and of the expected federation, clearly gives the school the sustainable capacity to improve itself.
- Continue to develop consistency in the quality of teaching, paying particular attention to the experiences of, and impact for, boys and girls.