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9 October 2014

Mrs Jan O'Connor
Headteacher
Lower Meadow Primary School
Batemoor Road
Sheffield
South Yorkshire
S8 8EE

Dear Mrs O'Connor

Special measures monitoring inspection of Lower Meadow Primary School

Following my visit with Peter Marsh, Additional Inspector, to your school on 7 and 8 October 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 January 2014. 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 and the Interim Executive Director Children Young People and Families for Sheffield.

Yours sincerely

Chris Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2014

- Improve the quality of teaching, particularly between Years 1 and 6 so that it is at least consistently good, in order to quicken progress and raise standards in reading, writing and mathematics, by making sure that:
 - inadequate teaching is eradicated
 - activities and tasks are carefully planned to enable pupils of all abilities to build on what they already know and can do, especially for the most able, so that all achieve highly
 - pupils have plenty of time to practise what they have learnt
 - teachers' expectations of the quality, quantity and presentation of pupils' work are always high
 - pupils have regular opportunities to practise their literacy and numeracy skills in other subjects
 - marking tells pupils what they know well, what they need to do next and teachers ensure that pupils act on the advice given.
- Raise standards and accelerate pupils' progress in reading by ensuring that:
 - pupils' knowledge and understanding of phonics (the sounds that letters and groups of letters represent) is reinforced throughout the day, as well as in phonics lessons
 - there is a clear purpose to guided reading sessions so that all pupils can add to their reading and comprehension skills
 - pupils supported through the pupil premium funding, disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs, receive specific support relevant to their particular needs.
- Improve pupils' behaviour in lessons so that it is good or better by making sure that:
 - teachers have high expectations of pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning from the start to the end of lessons
 - teaching is interesting and makes pupils want to learn.
- Make sure that leaders and managers at all levels, including governors, quickly acquire the skills to rapidly drive forward improvements in achievement and teaching, so that:
 - all leaders can check the quality of teaching much more rigorously in order to be clear how well pupils are learning
 - all leaders are clear about what actions are necessary to improve learning and to make sure teaching builds well on what pupils already know and can do
 - the governing body has a much better understanding of the school's work, particularly pupils' achievement and teaching, so that they can challenge senior and middle leaders about its performance.

An external review of governance should be undertaken, to include a specific focus on the impact of pupil premium funding, in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance can be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 7 to 8 October 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and other senior leaders, the Chair and three other members of the governing body and a representative of the local authority. Seventeen part-lessons were observed, of which more than half were observed jointly with senior leaders. Inspectors also scrutinised a range of documents including the school's amended plans for improvement, achievement and attendance data, records of recent checks on the quality of teaching and minutes of governing body meetings.

Context

Five teachers left the school at the end of the summer term. Two new teachers took up post in September and there are three supply teachers working in the school. The assistant headteacher has an increased teaching commitment and now teaches for two days each week in the reception class. The school is seeking to recruit two more teachers to permanent posts. Different teachers now have responsibility for leading literacy and numeracy. A senior leader and the head of the Hearing Impaired Unit also left the school at the end of the summer term. Some governors have left the governing body and two new governors have been recruited. There are currently three parent governor vacancies.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Unvalidated examination results for 2014 indicate that levels of achievement remain low. Standards attained in reading, writing and mathematics by the end of Key Stage 2 remained well below those seen nationally and far too few pupils made expected or good progress. The picture of low achievement was the same at the end of Key Stage 1, although the proportion of Year 1 pupils reaching the expected level of development in phonics (the sounds that letters and groups of letters represent) did rise. Standards are better in the early years, where pupils, particularly in the Reception Year, made good progress.

Pupils currently in the school began to make better progress last year. This was most marked in upper Key Stage 2. However, the improved progress was not enough to overcome the low levels of achievement that occurred prior to the last inspection. Better rates of progress continue to be evident so far this year. The school's strategies to narrow attainment gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers are having a positive impact. One-to-one reading sessions at lunchtimes, small group work for literacy and numeracy and targeted reading support in lessons are helping to narrow gaps in achievement significantly.

Tracking data indicate that the school expects standards at the end of Key Stage 2 to rise in 2015, but senior leaders do not expect standards to reach national averages. In order to do so, the school accepts that more pupils will need to make accelerated progress to overcome the legacy of weaker teaching in the past.

The school is implementing a new approach to assessment and tracking of progress. All members of staff are being trained so that they can assess pupils' progress accurately under the new system. The introduction of this system has delayed the setting of targets for pupils' attainment in some year groups.

The quality of teaching

The high turnover of teachers at the school has been a challenge for senior leaders to manage. However, a thorough induction programme for new teachers, including those currently on supply contracts, has ensured that they have made a good start. The school's new behaviour and marking policies are being consistently applied and teachers' planning is better matched to the different needs of pupils. Consequently, very little inadequate teaching remains. However, the standard of teaching in Key Stage 1 and in lower Key Stage 2 still requires improvement. Teachers are benefiting from opportunities to visit other schools and from the support they are receiving with planning. The school continues to seek to strengthen teaching and is currently seeking to recruit two more teachers.

Teachers are increasingly using information from pupils' prior attainment to inform their planning. As a result, pupils are more engaged in learning and more pupils, particularly in upper Key Stage 2, show a thirst for knowledge and enjoyment of learning. However, there are still occasions when the work set for the most-able pupils is too easy and does not give them the opportunity to extend their knowledge, skills and understanding sufficiently. As a result, not enough of the most-able pupils make good progress. In some lessons pupils do not have sufficient time to practise new skills and reach a successful conclusion, because some teachers do not explain or model tasks clearly enough and then intervene too much, which disrupts the flow of learning and slows the rate of progress. In mathematics, pupils do not get enough opportunities to apply their calculation skills to mathematical problems, which prevents them getting a secure understanding. As a result, some pupils struggle to recall topics covered the previous year and time is lost revisiting prior learning before they can move forward.

Senior leaders have set out clear non-negotiables for presentation and marking and these are being consistently applied. New systems for marking are beginning to have an impact on pupils' learning and progress. Teachers' comments are generally aligned to the lesson objective and next steps or corrections are increasingly actioned in 'improvement time'. The quality of handwriting and grammar is improving because teachers have higher expectations, although some opportunities for pupils to practise literacy and numeracy skills in other subjects are missed.

Standards of achievement in reading remain a concern, but there are signs of some improvement. Pupils in the early years develop phonics skills quickly because the teaching is sound. However, teachers in Key Stage 1 do not build on this good start and spend too long covering sounds pupils already know and recognise. Nor do they ensure that pupils apply their grasp of sounds to writing sufficiently. Guided reading lessons across Key Stage 2 are having a positive impact and are strengthening reading skills further. However, the approach to guided reading, which works well in upper Key Stage 2, is less effective where pupils are less secure readers. Where this is the case, the skills of teaching assistants need to be strengthened, so that they can better help groups of pupils to understand, analyse and draw inference from texts.

Disadvantaged pupils receive additional support for reading at lunchtimes and many receive small-group support in the afternoon to address gaps in literacy and numeracy. Many take part in musical initiatives such as the Young Voices programme and the Sheffield Cathedral Choir. The school's strategies to raise the achievement of disadvantaged students are having a positive impact.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The behaviour of pupils in lessons is much improved and pupils show good attitudes to learning. Where teachers and teaching assistants show enthusiasm, pupils respond and work with purpose. They invariably listen to and respond to teachers' instructions and requests; consequently, little learning time is lost. Pupils remain on task throughout the lesson. Relationships are good and pupils collaborate well with one another to develop their ideas. This is particularly evident in Key Stage 2 where pupils make good progress when working purposefully in pairs or small groups. Pupils are taking more pride in their work and are keen to go back and make corrections or improvements in response to teachers' marking.

Levels of attendance are improving. Across the 2013-14 academic year, overall attendance rose to be in line with that seen nationally. The school's efforts to increase the attendance of disadvantaged pupils in particular are successfully contributing to the narrowing of achievement gaps.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The school's plans for improvement have been strengthened since the first monitoring inspection. Plans are now more detailed and have clear success criteria and milestones setting out what should be achieved and by when. As a result, leaders at all levels are working with more urgency. The impact of planned actions is being checked more systematically by governors. Leaders are more ambitious and expectations of staff have been raised. Some pressing tasks, such as setting targets for pupil progress and setting performance management objectives for teachers, are still to be done.

Senior leaders are undertaking regular lesson observations. Some have been done jointly with the headteacher of another local school and a representative of the local authority. This work, together with a thorough review of teaching by the local authority, checks on the work in pupils' books and analysis of progress data mean senior leaders have an accurate picture of the quality of teaching. Following the last inspection, a more rigorous approach to managing the performance of teachers resulted in a number of teachers leaving the school. Recruitment of new teachers is ongoing. Good induction arrangements for new teachers and sound new policies are helping to improve the overall quality of teaching. Teachers are responding positively to the support and feedback they receive and are keen to improve. Links with other schools are beginning to be effective and support is increasingly focused on the right priorities.

Changes to the school's staffing have meant middle leadership responsibilities have been reallocated. New middle leaders are beginning to address the key challenge of ensuring that more pupils make good progress in reading, writing and mathematics.

The governing body has acted upon the recommendations of the external review of governance which includes the implementation of a new committee structure. The new teaching and learning committee meets every month to scrutinise pupil progress data and check on the impact of actions to improve the quality of teaching. Individual governors are now aligned to the key improvement areas set out in the school's plans for improvement. Consequently, governors have begun to take a more pro-active role in driving improvement. Governors are spending more time in school and have recognised the need to establish clear protocols to ensure that there is no blurring of the roles of leaders and governors. Regular steering group meetings now hold senior leaders accountable for the delivery of the school improvement plan. These actions are ensuring that the progress the school is making is more accurately evaluated. Governors accept that standards in the school remain inadequate. They continue to be committed to finding a strong academy sponsor that can provide the long-term resources and expertise to take the school forward.

External support

The local authority commissioned a review of the school in June 2014 which provided leaders and governors with a helpful evaluation. Since then, more formal support arrangements have been brokered with a local primary school. The local authority is monitoring the impact of this arrangement. In addition, the local authority is consulting governors and the foundation trust on proposals to suspend the governing body and instate an interim executive board. The outcome of this consultation should be known soon.