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28 November 2014

Mr Martin Clinton
The Executive Headteacher
Istead Rise Primary School
Downs Road
Gravesend
DA13 9HG

Dear Mr Clinton

Special measures monitoring inspection of Istead Rise Primary School

Following my visit with Barbara Saltmarsh, Additional Inspector, to your school on 26 and 27 November, 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 fifth 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 not making enough 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 Director of Children's Services for Kent.

Yours sincerely

Sheena MacDonald
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching in Years 1 to 6 by:
 - ensuring that teachers set work for pupils that matches the whole range of abilities in each class and maintains their interest, especially for more-able pupils
 - ensuring that teachers' assessments of pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics are accurate
 - making sure teachers provide more opportunities for pupils to practise their skills in reading, writing and mathematics in different subjects
 - ensuring that teachers check that pupils in Key Stage 2 know their targets in English and mathematics and how these targets can be achieved.
- Increase rates of progress in Years 1 to 6 by:
 - planning more effective support for those pupils for whom the school receives pupil premium funding
 - raising teachers' expectations for what more-able pupils can achieve making sure that teachers' marking clearly identifies how work can be improved and providing opportunities for pupils to act on the teachers' comments.
- Improve leadership and management by:
 - increasing the capacity of senior and subject leaders to make accurate checks on teaching and provide clear feedback to teachers to help them improve the quality of their teaching
 - ensuring that information from checks on pupils' progress is used to identify any dips in progress and is quickly followed up with effective action
 - ensuring that school leaders at all levels take urgent and effective steps to improve communication with parents and carers, especially with regard to behaviour
 - providing training for governors to improve their skills in checking on the school's performance and to ensure that the governing body consistently implements agreed procedures.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and management may be improved.

Report on the fifth monitoring inspection on 26 and 27 November 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work including attending a house assembly, looking at pupils' books and observing the teaching and learning in all classes. As well as carrying out 13 lesson observations, inspectors made shorter visits to several classes. We scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, head of school, deputy headteacher, the mathematics subject leader and the special educational needs coordinator. We also met with four members of the governing body and a representative from the local authority.

Context

The deputy headteacher joined the school in June and the leadership of English and mathematics has changed since the last visit. There have been further staff changes. Several teachers left at the end of the summer term and three teachers joined the school in September. Further staff changes are planned for January. A new Chair of the Governing Body took over that responsibility in June and there has been a change of clerk to the governing body. Two new parent governors joined the governing body earlier this week.

Achievement of pupils at the school

There were improvements in the end of Year 6 assessments from the exceptionally low level of the previous year. However, the pace of improvement has not been rapid enough so that pupils have not caught up to where they should be. Pupils' mathematics skills were close to the national average, but skills remain below average in reading and writing.

Despite some improvement in Key Stage 2, there is no sign of improvement in either the Early Years Foundation Stage or in Key Stage 1; in fact the situation has worsened. Fewer than half of the children achieved a good level of development at the end of their time in Reception. This is well below average and is due to sharp falls in reading and writing skills. In Year 1, the results of the phonic screening check were exceptionally low, with about two thirds of the pupils not reaching the expected level. This check is used to show how well pupils are learning to use their knowledge of sounds and letters to read words. By the end of Year 2 the pupils' reading, writing and mathematics skills remained similar to the previous year and well below average.

This means that, in September, pupils moved into Years 1, 2 and 3 already having fallen behind, with much ground to make up. Although there are individual classes and year groups which buck the trend, overall, disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs achieve much less well than other pupils, and the gaps between their achievement and other pupils remain very wide. The first checks on reading, writing and mathematics skills, which happened at the end of term 1 this

academic year, do not show that the pace is speeding up; in fact, most pupils' skills remain the same as they were in July or have worsened.

The work in the pupils' books shows some improvement, particularly in the oldest classes. There is evidence of more writing than was previously the case and the quality of handwriting and presentation has improved. The pupils are responding enthusiastically to the recently introduced writing challenges, which are stimulated by events such as visits to museums or letters from Doctor Who. Pupils are motivated by these approaches and are keen to talk about them. This enthusiasm is reflected in some good quality work arising from these activities.

However, much of what was reported in previous visits remains the same. Teachers try to match work so as to cater for pupils' different abilities, but sometimes the activities are confusing, too easy or too difficult. The teaching and learning observed during this visit, and the amount of short fairly low level pieces of work in pupils' books, suggest that pupils do not have sufficient opportunity to work at length or in depth. The challenge in terms of how much and at what level pupils should be achieving has not significantly improved since the last visit. There remains significant variability between pupils' achievement in different classes.

The quality of teaching

The reason why pupils' achievement remains too slow is because the weaknesses in teaching reported on previous visits remain. During this visit, there was a small amount of teaching which made an inadequate impact, meaning pupils made no progress, and a small amount which enabled pupils to be fully involved and make good progress. However, as before, most of the teaching seen during the visit required improvement. This is not good enough to ensure that pupils make the rapid improvement needed to help them catch up.

As reported in previous visits, these weaknesses are not the result of a lack of effort on the teachers' part. Teachers plan carefully and try to make lessons interesting. Relationships with pupils are positive and classrooms generally well ordered and well organised. In some cases, pupils do not make fast enough progress because they do not have enough time to complete work of sufficient quality or quantity, and the amount they are expected to do is often too little. Occasionally they are confused by teachers' explanations and this is because, sometimes, teachers' own subject knowledge is a bit shaky. Most teachers follow the school's marking policy and clearly spend a great deal of time marking pupils' work. They write extensive comments and set challenges. It is not clear, however, that this effort is having sufficient impact on pupils' progress. In some classes, the pupils are responding and improving their work. In others, the pupils do not, or are not able to, respond. Leaders should consider how they can make this activity less time consuming and more effective.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils are polite and friendly. They respond well to the adults and they behave well in lessons and around the school. During this visit, pupils eagerly discussed which charities they would like their 'house' to support, and they show a keen awareness of the needs of others. There continues to be a little off-task chatting in lessons. This usually happens when pupils are not sure what they are supposed to be doing, or when they finish one activity and are waiting for the next. Very few pupils seem to take the initiative and seek out further activities. Their attitudes to learning are, therefore, less well developed because they have too few opportunities to use their initiative, develop persistence or take responsibility for their learning.

Pupils are safe and well cared for in school. The systems for ensuring their safety are secure. Incidents of poor behaviour are meticulously recorded and follow-up action is taken. These records are now beginning to be analysed to identify any trends or triggers. Attendance improved last academic year. However, a comparison between the first term of this academic year and the same time last year shows a disappointing drop, so that overall attendance is currently below average.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Overall, leadership and management have been strengthened at senior level by the arrival of the deputy headteacher. She, along with other leaders, is carrying out regular checks on the quality of teaching and learning so this aspect has improved this term. The new Chair of the Governing Body is very experienced and is bringing an increased level of support and rigour to the governing body and to the school as a whole. The deputy headteacher has responsibility for English and has introduced initiatives such as poetry events and writing challenges. Staff have been trained in a systematic approach to the teaching of phonics and this has just been introduced. All of these initiatives appear to be resulting in a renewed enthusiasm and some early signs of improvement, particularly in writing. There is a new mathematics subject leader who has taken up the role with gusto. However, although there are hopeful signs, it is too early to see any impact on pupils' achievement.

The weaknesses in the school's improvement plan were highlighted in the last two reports and the new improvement plan for this academic year has the same weaknesses. There is still too little focus on finding out whether the actions taken are making sufficient difference to pupils' learning. There are very few targets or milestones so it will be possible, as happened last year, for dips in achievement to come as a surprise at the end of the year. For example, although leaders make sure that checks on pupils' skills are regular and accurate, this information was not used effectively during last academic year to identify, or tackle at an early stage, the serious concerns about reading and writing in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. Similarly, additional support activities for pupils with special educational needs and those who are eligible for support provided by additional government funding are carefully planned and carried out. However, they have not been effectively evaluated to make sure that they are making sufficient difference.

Parents continue to be increasingly positive about the school, and the vast majority are confident that their children are safe and well looked after. Weekly newsletters and curriculum newsletters are interesting and informative. The views of the parents who talked to an inspector during the inspection reflect those who responded to both the school's survey in June and to the online questionnaire, Parent View. Although generally positive, significant minorities are concerned about aspects such as how much progress their children are making. Parents are understandably concerned about the many changes in staffing and the impact this is having on their children.

External support

The school continues to receive support from Meopham Academy and from the local authority. However this has not resulted in the school improving rapidly enough. Part of the reason for this has been because of the many staffing changes, for example, in subject leadership, which has meant some things needed to be covered again. Support has been directed towards Key Stage 1. However, the lack of improvement in pupils' reading, writing and mathematics skills at the end of Year 2, poor outcomes of the phonic screening check and the dip in reading and writing in Reception suggest that this has not been effective.