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Mrs Sharon Bates
Headteacher
Mill Hill Primary School
Sunnyside Avenue
Tunstall
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST6 6ED

Dear Mrs Bates

Special measures monitoring inspection of Mill Hill Primary School

Following my visit with Stuart Bellworthy, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 17 and 18 June 2015, 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 December 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 appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection subject to discussion with me.

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 Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Stoke-on-Trent.

Yours sincerely

Mark Sims

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- Improve the quality of teaching in Key Stages 1 and 2 so that it is always good or better and thus raise attainment, close gaps in the attainment and progress of different groups and accelerate the progress all pupils make, especially in writing by:
 - ensuring teachers use information from assessments including their marking to help them plan and set targets for individuals in order to meet the needs of pupils of different ability, particularly of the most able
 - making sure that pupils are always given good guidance about how to improve their work, that marking helps them to improve their handwriting and spelling and that pupils are given the time to respond
 - increasing the opportunities pupils have to practise their literacy and mathematical skills in subjects other than English and mathematics
 - making sure teachers increase the opportunities pupils have to think things out for themselves or to take the initiative.
- Improve attendance and reduce persistent absence further by working more closely with parents.
- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, so that there is the capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning by:
 - improving the skills of senior, middle and subject leaders, especially in English and mathematics, so that leaders at all levels can drive improvement in teaching and learning
 - improving the effectiveness of the monitoring of teaching and learning and ensuring the assessment of pupils' progress is accurate so that leaders have a clear understanding of what needs to be improved and can hold teachers to account for such improvements
 - ensuring governors have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses to be able to challenge the school effectively and hold leaders to account
 - undertaking an external review of governance, to include a specific focus on the school's use of the pupil premium, in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, associate headteacher, acting deputy headteacher, the executive headteacher from Haywood Academy which is part of the City Learning Multi - Academy Trust, senior and middle leaders, other members of staff, two members of the Interim Executive Board, groups of pupils and a representative from the local authority. Safeguarding procedures were checked. Inspectors also spoke with 13 parents informally at the school gate and in the playground.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the date for the school to become an academy has been postponed again, this time to 1 July 2015. One of the two acting deputy headteachers has left and has not been replaced. The time allocation for the associate headteacher has been increased to three days a week. A new post of assistant headteacher has been created and is currently being advertised internally. The special educational needs coordinator has returned from maternity leave but the role continues to be strategically led and implemented by the acting deputy headteacher. The Chair of the Interim Executive Board stepped down as Chair in June but remains on the board. One member has resigned from the board. Three teachers currently employed in Key Stage 1 are due to leave at the end of the summer term. A number of key staff and Year 6 pupils were away on a residential trip during both days of the monitoring inspection.

Achievement of pupils at the school

School data tracking indicates that pupils in all phase groups are set to make significant improvements in 2015 compared to their peers last year. This would narrow the attainment gap with all pupils nationally by the end of Key Stage 2. In Year 6, the school's predicted results, which are yet to be moderated or confirmed, indicate that 72% of pupils are on track to achieve the Level 4 expected of 11-year-olds in reading, writing and mathematics. Predicted results are above last year's national average for all pupils in mathematics, but below in reading and writing.

The proportion of the most able pupils forecast to exceed the expected level for their age is in line with the national average in reading. It is below average in mathematics and well-below average in writing where pupils started the key stage with a very low level of attainment. Pupils have made accelerated progress in Year 6 to ensure they have made good progress from their low starting points at the end of Key Stage 1.

Disadvantaged pupils who are supported through the pupil premium (pupils for whom the academy receives additional funding, including those known to be eligible for free school meals and those in the care of the local authority) are making rapid gains to narrow the attainment gap with all pupils nationally. However, significant gaps in attainment remain for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs.

From lessons seen and book scrutinies in Key Stage 2, the progress pupils make was variable. While some pupils were making good progress in Year 6 and parts of Year 4, the progress of other pupils requires improvement.

In Year 2, pupils are expected to achieve standards in reading, writing and mathematics closer to the national average and significantly higher than those achieved in 2014, particularly in writing, which has been a focus for the school. The proportion anticipated to exceed the expected level for their age is above last year's national average.

Progress in lessons and work seen in Key Stage 1 requires improvement. Pupils' books indicate that they are below the expected level of attainment for their age, especially in basic literacy and numeracy skills, although gaps are closing. The reading recovery programme funded by the pupil premium is having a significant impact on improving reading for the 10 pupils benefiting from the support.

Children in the early years have made good progress from their low starting points. Outcomes, externally moderated as accurate by the local authority, indicate that the proportion of children achieving a good level of development in 2015 was significantly above that achieved the previous year and in line with the previous year's national average. In lessons seen in the early years children were making good progress in their learning.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching over time is good in the early years, Year 2 and in parts of Key Stage 2. Elsewhere it requires improvement. No teaching over time is inadequate but evidence from pupils' books indicates that the quality of teaching remains inconsistent, particularly in Key Stage 1.

Where learning is strongest, pupils are set work that either is at the appropriate level of challenge for them or is accompanied with additional resources, which enable them to access more difficult work. Paired work is used well by teachers to allow pupils to learn from and support each other. Expectations are very high in the early years, where children transfer their phonics (the sounds that letters make) skills well into their reading, and in some lessons in Key Stage 2. Where teachers asked challenging questions this gave pupils the chance to offer extended replies and supply reasons to justify their answers.

There were missed opportunities at the start of some lessons to check pupils' previous learning before moving them on to the main activity. In some lessons, where all pupils had the same level of work, there were no prompts for those who found the work hard or extension tasks for those who found it easy.

Targets set for pupils at the beginning of the year have not been checked or revised in too many books. In Year 6, they are dated and signed by teachers when completed, but this practice is not consistent elsewhere. Pupils are given verbal feedback of how to reach the next stage in their learning but where there is no written record of this, pupils do not have a regular reminder to which to refer.

Where there are generic targets for pupils the most able are not always sufficiently challenged.

Some teachers still rely on pupils volunteering to answer questions. As a result, they do not know if others have understood the work. The quality of marking remains inconsistent. In too many instances, teachers' feedback is limited to brief comments and where extension tasks are set, either pupils do not respond to them or, if they do, teachers do not mark their response. Pupils are given 'fix-it' time to respond to marking but not all pupils take this up. The best marking in pupils' books offers pupils clear guidance on how to improve and gives them opportunities to practise work they struggled with or to respond to extension tasks if they successfully completed their previous work.

There are emerging opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills in other subjects. This is especially apparent in Year 6 where pupils are given a wide range of tasks to practice extended writing in a number of different genres, including diaries, factual reports and arguments for and against a motion. Elsewhere there is a narrower range of opportunities for writing for a real purpose and an over-reliance on writing worksheets. This limits progress, especially for the most able pupils. Older pupils reported they did not study as many different subjects as before because of the additional time allocated to literacy and numeracy. In lower Key Stage 1, opportunities for pupils to develop numeracy skills in other subjects are limited.

Better learning was also seen where pupils were encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. In one Year 4 lesson, pupils took the lead asking questions of a character from a book through 'hot-seating.' In some other lessons, however, pupils respond to teachers' directions and are happy to be led by them. In some lessons, pupils are over-reliant on teachers or additional adults to complete their work but elsewhere they are set challenging questions to think out answers for themselves.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The behaviour of pupils seen by inspectors around the school, in classrooms and in the playground was good. There have been no recent fixed-term exclusions. When pupils behave well in corridors or in the dining room they are praised by staff. Pupils were helpful and courteous towards others and showed a positive attitude to their learning. Pupils enjoy their lessons and particularly the work in their creative learning journeys. A small minority of older boys spoken with did not enjoy writing. Only when the pace of a lesson dipped or an activity went on for too long did a small minority of pupils start to get restless and fidget or fiddle with equipment, but this did not disrupt the learning of others who were still working. Inspectors observed pupils playing safely in the playground where there was a high level of adult supervision.

The level of pupils' attendance has remained stable since the last monitoring visit and remains below the national average. This has been attributed by the school to a

sickness bug that significantly affected attendance, which up to that point had been steadily improving.

The rate of persistent absence has fallen because the school has worked hard to tackle the issue with particular families where their children's attendance has fallen below 90%. The employment of an educational welfare officer and two family workers enables the school to respond more quickly to pupils' absence and to build up relationships with parents and families. These close links continue even when a pupils' attendance has risen above 90% to ensure that it does not dip again.

There are plans to track the attendance of pupils by other pupil groups, in addition to boys and girls, but this will not be in place until September.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Under the determined leadership of the headteacher and other senior leaders, the school is on course to make rapid gains in pupils' achievement in all key stages by the end of the academic year. According to staff spoken with the drive and direction of the headteacher has led directly to these improvements, working in partnership with other senior leaders as a team. Decisive action has been taken to improve teaching which has led to individual teachers improving the quality of their lessons or changes in personnel. This has led to a considerable turnover of staff in Key Stage 1, where previous identified weaknesses have been addressed.

The school recognises it has not to date met its responsibilities to evaluate the impact of different activities funded by the pupil premium. A recent audit has now been carried out and a senior leader identified to take the lead in this area.

The capacity to improve leadership has been strengthened by the additional time allocation for the associate headteacher and the enhanced role of the acting deputy headteacher. Middle and subject leaders are growing into their roles to monitor and support teaching through lesson observations and work scrutinies. Leaders have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Teachers identified by the school for the high quality of their teaching have been placed on an aspiring leaders programme, in order to promote further capacity in the leadership and management of the school. The extent to which middle leaders take responsibility for data analysis is still developing. There is no subject leader for modern foreign languages.

Members of the interim executive board have considerable educational knowledge and experience. They question and challenge leaders based on the detailed information they receive, but have some gaps in their current knowledge on the quality of teaching and are not fully up-to-date on recent leadership personnel issues. Members of the interim executive board are informed how much money the school receives from the pupil premium and know that reading recovery is one of the funded activities, but they have not evaluated the impact of the funding in closing the gap in attainment for eligible pupils.

Leaders have worked hard to engage with parents, including a high presence on the gate every morning. Almost all of the parents spoken with who had children in early years or in Key Stage 1 were happy with improvements in the school's work. They reported that communication with them was better. Staff were more accessible and willing to help. Parents with older pupils in the school had more mixed views. Some thought the school had measurably improved, but others specified year groups in Key Stage 2 where they had not seen any change.

The school ensures that its pupils are kept safe and secure and carries out all required checks of adults in the school. This was not fully reflected in the school's single central record but swift action was taken to address this during the visit.

External support

The local authority has continued to work closely with the school and will do so after the school becomes an academy, especially in moderation of assessments and in supporting literacy in Key Stage 1. It has already endorsed the school's assessments for the early years and is about to moderate Key Stages 1 and 2 outcomes. The local authority has also contributed to a recent special educational needs audit. Two members of staff from the local authority sit on the interim executive board and contribute using their knowledge and experience. The leaders and teachers of Haywood Academy have continued to work in partnership with the school in preparation for its move to become part of the City Learning Multi-Academy Trust.