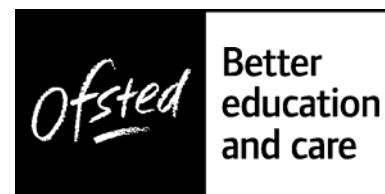


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15 June 2005

Mrs L Neely
Acting Headteacher
Benson CE Junior School
Oxford Road
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Dear Mrs Neely

Implementation of Benson CE Junior School's Action Plan

Following my visit to your school on 8 and 9 June 2005, I write to confirm the findings and to notify you of the outcomes.

As you know, the inspection was part of a policy involving a broader series of visits by HMI and Additional Inspectors to check on the development and improvement of schools where the section 10 inspection indicated that the school was underachieving. You will recall that the aims of the visit were to assess the progress made in addressing and eliminating underachievement and meeting the targets given in the action plan. I also evaluated standards of achievement and the quality of education, especially in relation to areas of underachievement.

During the visit I inspected nine lessons or part lessons; attended a registration period and an assembly; scrutinised a wide range of documentation provided by the school; and held discussions with yourself and nominated staff on the causes and areas of underachievement. I also examined a range of the pupils' work and spoke informally with other staff and pupils.

On the basis of the evidence gathered during the visit, I made the following observations to you, the chair of governors and a representative of the LEA.

The school action plan is good. It focuses on establishing important systems needed to underpin the improvements eliminating underachievement. It contains helpful targets for the improvement of teaching but it does not include quantifiable targets for the percentage of pupils achieving the higher Level 5.

The school is due to be amalgamated with Benson CE Infant School in a new school building in Autumn 2005. The acting headteacher was the deputy headteacher at the infant school and is now acting headteacher of both. This is a significant workload and sensibly she does not have a regular teaching commitment. This will continue to be an important factor to consider when amalgamation takes place, in order to maintain the sharp focus on eliminating underachievement.

The results from the national tests for 2004 at the end of Key Stage 2 indicated that the school's results were similar to national figures in English, mathematics and science, but there is a different picture when the school's results are compared with those schools in its benchmark group. The results in English, mathematics and science were low in relation to prior attainment at age seven with pupils in similar schools. The value added by the school between Year 2 and Year 6 was well below what is expected. However, the trend in improvement over four years is above the national trend.

The school completed an analysis of the outcomes of the tests, pinpointing aspects of weakness in English such as writing and spelling. Since this analysis, steps have been taken to address weaker areas, although they have not been in place long enough as yet to see much noticeable impact. Plans are already in place for subject leaders in English and mathematics to work with the LEA in making a detailed analysis of findings from the 2005 national tests.

In lessons, standards of attainment were usually in line with what is expected for the pupils' ages. When the teaching was good, standards were generally higher; for example, the use of a range of strategies, including discussion, drama and the effective use of the teaching assistant to extend the more able pupils in Year 5, enabled the pupils to write in an interesting and exciting way. In Year 3 more able pupils exceeded their writing targets when writing imaginary letters home from Nigeria. They used descriptive vocabulary and wrote enthusiastically.

The school has focused on improving the pupils' speaking and listening skills and this is beginning to have a positive impact. Most teachers used opportunities well to promote these skills, although in a few lessons the teachers dominated the discussion too much. The pupils talked clearly about books which they had enjoyed and explain their reasons in a sensible way. Standards in writing remained too low, with some careless mistakes in spelling and punctuation. Most pupils in Year 6 wrote in a joined cursive style and took care when presenting their work.

Standards in mathematics are improving, with a significant percentage of pupils working at the higher Level 5 in Year 6. They used different strategies to arrive at their answers and explained their reasoning clearly. Good cross-curricular links are developing, for example, in science and geography.

No lessons were observed in science during the inspection. Analysis of the work in some of the pupils' books showed that standards of attainment were broadly in line with what is expected for the pupils' ages, but there was not always sufficient challenge for the more able pupils particularly with regard to investigative work.

In all lessons behaviour was satisfactory or better and in most lessons it was good. Behaviour in and around the school was good; the pupils were polite and courteous. In lessons, the pupils were attentive and, when the teaching was interesting, they were enthusiastic and keen to learn. In a few lessons, low level chatter impeded the progress. Attitudes overall were satisfactory; in some lessons the pupils were compliant but not enthusiastic. Relationships in the school are positive and consequently pupils feel valued and secure. During the upheaval caused by the extensive building works, the school has been very successful in maintaining good standards of behaviour in challenging circumstances.

Attendance is similar to the national median and most pupils arrive at school on time. There have been no exclusions during the past year.

The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in all lessons and it was good in four out of nine lessons. Strengths of the teaching included clear introductions and explanations, using a range of strategies to interest and motivate the pupils and thorough planning. Teachers made sure that the pupils understood the learning objectives and they had high expectations of what the pupils could achieve. The use of strategies, such as having time to think or discuss with a partner, and the use of drama, had a positive effect in promoting learning. Teaching assistants were fully involved in the pupils' learning and had a positive impact on their progress. Cross-curricular links made the learning more interesting and meaningful for the pupils.

There were some weaknesses in the teaching. The pace of some lessons was too slow and the teachers dominated the discussion too much. The pupils did not always have enough independence, for example, instead of helping themselves to equipment it was given out to them. There was insufficient scope for pupils to make choices and apply their own ideas. The learning objectives were not always shared with the pupils, which meant they were not always sufficiently clear about what they needed to do. Some plenary sessions were too rushed and so valuable learning opportunities were missed. The school has recently introduced a more consistent system of planning, but lesson plans were not always readily available to help ensure progression in learning.

The quality of marking varied: although there was some informative marking there was insufficient evaluative marking in order to help the pupils to understand what they needed to do to improve.

The school has put effective procedures into place for tracking and levelling the pupils' work and is building up a useful bank of helpful data, which is beginning to

be used to tackle underachievement. Information from the data has been used to set targets and allocate extra support where necessary. These systems are becoming more firmly embedded in the teachers' day-to-day practice. A programme of termly assessments is in place, in addition to optional tests. The school has begun to analyse the test results and identify the next important steps to be taken in order to improve achievement.

In all lessons, the pupils made satisfactory progress. However the proportion of good and very good teaching is not yet high enough to ensure that the rate of progress accelerates and all pupils achieve their full potential.

During the monitoring inspection the school was involved in an 'Arts Week' on an African theme. The activities supported multi-cultural aspects of the curriculum well and pupils responded enthusiastically to them.

The acting headteacher took up the post just prior to the last inspection. She has acted quickly and skilfully to establish a clear sense of purpose and direction in a challenging time. She is providing calm but effective leadership and has a very clear understanding of what the school needs to do next. The acting headteacher is also working to ensure that senior and middle managers develop their skills through training and support. The teachers have benefited from a range of training and also have had time available to develop their subject area. Subject leaders in English and mathematics have produced informative action plans, which indicate clear steps for improvement. An extensive programme of monitoring has taken place with useful feedback provided for teachers. In view of the forthcoming amalgamation, the responsibilities for subject leadership are to be reviewed so as to make the fullest use of the teachers' skills. The governors have improved their role; they are committed to school improvement and suitably hold the school to account for its actions. The financial management of the school has improved, with very good financial support from the LEA.

The LEA has provided very good support for the school and the acting headteacher. There has been extensive training in addition to financial support. The action plan is very clear, with measurable steps for improvement.

Evaluation of Progress:

The school is making reasonable progress towards raising pupils' attainment and eliminating underachievement.

In relation to the action plan and the impact of the actions taken, reasonable progress has been made in addressing the key tasks which relate to the school's underachievement.

I am copying this letter to the chair of governors, the Director of Learning and Culture for Oxfordshire and the Diocesan Director of Education for Oxford. This letter will also be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

ANNE JOHNS
Additional Inspector

cc: chair of governors
LEA
diocese