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Ms J Dower
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Ms Dower

Implementation of Newton Primary School's Action Plan

Following the visit of Mr Adrian Gray HMI, to your school on 21 and 22 April 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings which are recorded in the attached note.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures. The focus of the inspection was to assess: the pupils' standards of attainment and their progress; the quality of education provided; the leadership and management of the school; the pupils' attitudes and behaviour; and the progress that has been made in implementing the action plan.

The school has made reasonable progress since the last monitoring inspection and good progress overall since being subject to special measures.

I am copying this letter and the note of the inspection findings to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director – Education for Cumbria. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid
Head of School Improvement

IMPLEMENTATION OF NEWTON PRIMARY SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN

Findings of the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures

During the visit eight lessons or parts of lessons and one assembly were inspected. Meetings were held with the acting headteacher, three staff, three governors and a representative of the LEA. Informal discussions were held with pupils and samples of work were examined. A range of documents was scrutinised. Using this evidence, HMI made the following observations to the headteacher, three governors and a representative from the LEA.

The school is now gathering relevant evidence on pupils' standards. A recent reading test taken by pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 indicated that all had a reading age above their chronological age. Optional national tests, taken in February, showed that all seven Year 2 pupils had reached Level 2 in reading, writing and mathematics; four had reached Level 3 in reading, but standards were not as high in mathematics. Recent assessments show that Year 6 pupils have, on average, made appropriate progress during the current school year in their mathematics and most are now at the expected Level 4. Progress has been less consistent in writing, with more than half having not yet reached the same standard.

Pupils' learning and progress was satisfactory or better in six of the eight lessons; it was good in half. It was at its best where pupils were enthused by the topic or task, such as in art and information and communication technology (ICT), or where the work was sufficiently open-ended to provide a challenge for all types of learners. On occasions, individual pupils made good progress in response to a series of probing questions from the teacher. Pupils' progress was less sustained where whole-class teaching continued for too long, when oral work only engaged a small proportion of the pupils, and where the work was not matched closely enough to the capabilities of all individuals or groups. In some lessons, the teacher was too busy helping some pupils to notice that others had finished their work or were wasting time.

The teaching was at least satisfactory in seven of the eight lessons, including four in which it was good. Some examples of good practice included: effective use of pupils' own work to model an agenda for the lesson, using ICT; plenary sessions which refocused on what the teacher was looking for in the work; good, structured use of opportunities for pupils to talk to the class; clear links to what had been learnt in previous lessons; good relationships between the teacher and the pupils; and effective use of a series of questions to deepen pupils' understanding.

Areas of weaker practice in teaching included: inconsistent planning, so that time was not always used to promote learning in the most efficient manner; planning which did not use effective structures; insufficient challenge to individual pupils during whole-class teaching; and the setting of work that was well within the capabilities of groups of pupils. Several lessons consisted of a lengthy whole-class introduction followed by one long session of pupil activity; little use was made of short, timed segments to create a sense of pace and challenge.

The school's ability measure the progress of its pupils is improving, but there is not yet a coherent approach to analysing progress over time because the quantity of available data is still limited and systems are not fully in place. New approaches, such as the introduction of moderated writing assessments, have the potential to contribute to a greater awareness of pupils' progress. However, the improved approach to assessment is not yet having a marked impact in the classrooms; for example, many pupils have only a limited understanding of their own progress and they cannot readily discuss targets for the improvement of their work. In some lessons, the complexities of managing multi-age groups meant that teachers were slow to make ongoing assessments of progress during the lesson, with the result that pupils wasted time on work that was too easy for them. Work is carefully marked with appropriate comments.

The governors have decided to pursue the school's federation with a junior school in the area, which is also the school of the acting headteacher. Although this arrangement should bring benefits in terms of administrative efficiency, secure leadership and greater subject expertise, it will leave some areas with less certain sustainable support. These areas include the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, as well as the specific expertise to manage classes with a wide variation in ages and abilities. Current plans are for the school to reduce to two classes for some of the day in 2005-6, further increasing the challenge to teachers.

The acting headteacher continues to provide good leadership, which is appreciated by the staff. She has developed a school which is welcoming, attractive and more confident in its own purposes. She has a wide range of responsibilities of which some, such as the co-ordination of some foundation subjects, have sensibly been given a lower priority at present. Her evaluation of the school's progress is realistic.

The other three staff contribute to leadership through a wide variety of tasks including subject leadership. Expertise is being developed, for example in the management of special educational needs, but the school on its own lacks the capacity to achieve consistent standards across the whole curriculum. The staff's roles in monitoring and evaluating provision are underdeveloped.

Some policies have been updated since the last inspection. However, those for health and safety and child protection are not up to date.

The school has good facilities for ICT and a new school hall, but there are some unsatisfactory aspects of its accommodation. The progress of pupils in some aspects of the Foundation Stage continues to be restricted by the limited space available for outside play, which is also difficult to access. Some toilets, clearly labelled for the use of pupils, are also used by adults.

The work of the governing body is satisfactory overall, with elements of good practice, although heavily reliant on a small number of committed governors. Some governors are active in monitoring the school and making visits, though the good practice shown by one in linking her observations to specific aspects of the action plan has not been copied by others. Minutes of the most recent meetings do not show evidence of the acting headteacher being held to account and in the February meeting there was no minuted discussion of the school's progress on the key issues.

Behaviour around the school, at break times and in assembly was very good. Pupils showed consideration for each other and an understanding of the school's expectations of them. In lessons, their attitudes and behaviour were at least satisfactory in all lessons and they were good in five. Although, almost without exception, behaviour was good, some pupils' attitudes to their learning became passive when they were insufficiently challenged.

Attendance during the spring term was 96.3 per cent, which was above average and also a slight improvement on the figure for the previous term. There have been no fixed-term or permanent exclusions during the current school year.

The LEA has provided a good level of challenge and support to the school, through providing some of the costs of the acting headteacher, through arranging appropriate training, and through monitoring the school's improvement. Staff are appreciative of the support they have received from the LEA's staff, such as the Foundation Stage consultant and the adviser for religious education.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: improve the quality of teaching where it is currently unsatisfactory

A number of appropriate training activities have been arranged, including on assessment in literacy and problem solving in mathematics; there has been one visit to observe good practice in a similar small school, although this was not equally helpful for all staff. A training session for teaching assistants has been held

and a consultant from the LEA has provided guidance about improvements to the Foundation Stage provision.

Although the ability of individual teachers to deliver aspects of the curriculum has improved, the quality of teaching overall has not made substantial progress since the last inspection. This is largely because the complexity of planning for classes with very wide ranges in age and ability results in individual lessons that do not consistently meet the needs of all learners.

Progress has been reasonable on this area for improvement.

2: provide a curriculum for the whole school that is broad, balanced and meets all statutory requirements

Although progress has been made in developing the use of whole-school curriculum plans, this key issue has not been given a high priority. A new scheme of work for religious education has been completed, links with other schools formed in order to develop provision in physical education, and access to French is now provided. However, this progress is being balanced against the additional issues involved in moving towards a two-class structure for next year. Progress in developing the use of ICT across the curriculum is limited. Planning for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is given only a low priority.

Progress on this area for improvement has been reasonable.

3: ensure high standards of behaviour for all pupils

The policies for behaviour and bullying have been revised. A "play leaders" scheme makes a positive contribution to the personal development of both younger and older pupils. Teachers used appropriate strategies for managing the behaviour of pupils, which was generally good throughout the school. Problems that were seen to arise more frequently related to attitudes to learning, with some pupils being much too passive during whole-class teaching or unsupervised work.

Good progress has been made on this area for improvement.

4: improve leadership and management

Leadership in the school continues to be dependant on the acting headteacher, but other staff are becoming more confident in at least some of their roles. Leadership is now clear and purposeful. Training has been provided for the co-ordinator of special educational needs while subject understanding has been enhanced through lesson observations by the co-ordinators of numeracy and literacy. However, the

quality of the school's provision is inconsistent and some skills of subject leadership, such as the monitoring of work, remain underdeveloped.

Good progress has been made in respect of leadership and reasonable progress has been made regarding the management aspects of this area for improvement.

5: to devise and implement a long term strategic plan for the school

Governors have a clear rationale in making plans for the school's future. Steps have been taken to revise the vision and aims of the school. Work on revising the strategic plan has been affected by the need to ratify proposals for a federation, which has recently taken place. Whereas this strategy promises much-needed support for the school's Key Stage 2 work, it will not provide any solution to the challenges facing the teacher of the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 class. Arrangements are being made to consult with parents.

Reasonable progress has been made on this area for improvement.

6: meet all statutory requirements

Appropriate training has been arranged for religious education in order to widen teachers' knowledge of world religions. The school has good facilities for the teaching of ICT, though records of monitoring the use of ICT across the curriculum are inadequate. The assembly observed included an appropriate act of collective worship and made a useful contribution to pupils' moral development.

Good progress has been made on this area for improvement.