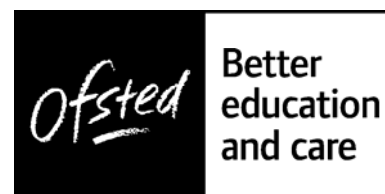


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12 December 2005

Mr D Capener
Headteacher
Bollington St John's CE Primary School
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Cheshire
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Dear Mr Capener

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BOLLINGTON ST JOHN'S CE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 6 and 7 December, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in September 2004.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

I observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the subject leaders, the chair of governors and two representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

There have been significant changes in school leadership and staffing since the previous monitoring inspection. The substantive headteacher took up his post in September. In the summer term he attended meetings with the governing body and local authority (LA) and was briefed by the acting headteacher, who left the school in early July. Two teachers resigned at the end of the summer term, a third in

September and a fourth will leave at the end of this term. The governing body has, with the agreement of HMI, appointed a newly qualified teacher to take the class of pupils from Years 1 and 2 from January 2006. A temporary teacher has been employed to give the teachers time for preparation, planning and assessment. The LA allocated a new adviser from September and she has been working jointly with the existing adviser.

Achievement and standards

As reported in the previous monitoring inspection, standards rose in the 2005 national tests at both Key Stages 1 and 2. However, the validated results show that the school underestimated the pupils' attainment in science. Nearly every pupil in Year 6 attained Level 4, the level expected for their age, and just under half attained the higher Level 5. The results were the best in the last three years and took the school above the national average. Nevertheless, the value added by the school at Key Stage 2 was less in science than in English and mathematics. When compared with 2003 and 2004, the school did much better in adding overall value and lifted its performance markedly.

Despite the indications of an upward trend at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2, there are still too many inconsistencies. The data from the school's assessments of pupils' progress show an uneven picture in the last school year. Too many pupils did not make enough progress, especially in reading and writing. The main weakness lies in the limited development of the pupils' skills; in reading, there are gaps in their ability to interpret the text and to read between the lines. In writing, the weak spots are the use of punctuation and the use language for effect. As reported previously, too many pupils find it hard to use their knowledge of number to calculate quickly, solve problems and interpret data. These weaknesses carry over into their work in other subjects, especially science. In information and communication technology (ICT), the pupils are working at the level expected for their age. They are using different programs, but have limited opportunities to apply their skills and knowledge as part of day-to-day learning across the curriculum.

The pupils in the Reception year have got off to a good start and are making progress in all the six areas of learning. They solved simple number problems, recognised some words and letters and used them to write messages to Bob the Builder.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- raise standards in English, mathematics, science and ICT by the end of Year 6 – satisfactory progress

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' attitudes, behaviour and attendance are good. The pupils in all years were attentive in lessons and willing to work. They enjoyed the visit of 'Key Strings' and talked enthusiastically about what they had done in the Buzz week in science.

The headteacher has strengthened the provision for the pupils' personal development. The Year 6 pupils are taking their new responsibilities very seriously, especially their lunchtime roles in answering the telephone and greeting visitors, and in organising the use of the recently purchased playground equipment. The introduction of three school houses and captains, as well as head boy and girl, has brought the school closer as a community. The re-formed school council has met several times. Councillors are raising practical issues, including the state of the toilets, and dealing with key school matters such as the compilation of an anti-bullying policy. This louder voice for the pupils is also reflected in the growing opportunities in lessons for them to comment on their own learning. Younger pupils are starting to reply to the teacher's questions about their work and pupils in all years value the house points awarded for good work. In addition to the weekly celebration assembly, the congratulations table displays pupils' achievements in and out of school. The addition of photographs of the "unsung heroes" has given esteem to those pupils selected by their teacher for showing a consistently positive attitude to learning.

The school continues to widen its horizons and to encourage the pupils to be aware of others. It is now sponsoring a girl in Brazil and pupils put together 67 Christmas shoe boxes and raised £83 for Children in Need.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching was good in four lessons and satisfactory in the other five. The more effective teaching was in the Foundation Stage and at Key Stage 1. While there were strengths in many of the lessons at Key Stage 2, there were also some areas for improvement. Gaps in the teachers' subject knowledge limited their ability to guide the pupils and exact the best from them. It was not always clear how the lesson was to develop particular knowledge, skills and effective techniques.

The teachers' focus on identifying clear, specific learning intentions and success criteria for each lesson has been beneficial. The teachers share the purpose of the lesson with the pupils and indicate it builds on previous learning. This was seen to good effect at the start of the day for pupils in Years 1 and 2. The teacher drew out the pupils' tips for readers and listeners, reminded them of useful strategies including stretching a word to hear the sounds, and prompted them to explain how they had decided the time was 9.24. Questions such as, "Who can remind me ...?" and "How did you do that?" focused the pupils' attention and affirmed their learning.

In some lessons, the teachers' questions did not really draw out what the pupils knew and how they knew it. As a result, some learning was superficial and in some cases, the higher attaining pupils were not stretched enough.

The Science Buzz week was a welcome innovation for the pupils and helpful in heightening the staff's awareness of the pupils' latent knowledge and skills of enquiry. Pupils and teachers commented positively on the pupils' industry and wide range of questions. The increased focus on practical work and problem solving, not only in science but also in mathematics, has emphasised the school's scant resources. Recent audits have also reiterated the need to update and widen the range of reading books and support material. St John's lacks many of the items that are commonplace in other primary schools. As a result, it is not best placed to meet all the pupils' needs. The headteacher has, with the help of the parents' association and the LA, acquired items to support the teachers' preparation and the pupils' learning this term.

The provision for the pupils in the Reception year is now more varied. The current theme of Bollington Housebuilders is being used well to promote learning across the six required areas. The teacher is keeping a good record of the pupils' experiences and progress and raising the challenge accordingly.

The headteacher has agreed with the staff a calendar for the assessment of the pupils' attainment and progress. Subject leaders have the key information they need to track the pupils' progress and to monitor how well the school is meeting the requirements of the National Curriculum. There are plans to incorporate booster sessions and support programmes once the assessment data from this term has been analysed to identify those pupils who have not made enough progress or who need an extra challenge.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- the role of subject leaders to provide a broad, balanced and interesting curriculum that is flexible enough to meet all pupils' needs – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

In his first term of headship, the headteacher has shown energy and enthusiasm. He has been quick to find his feet and to gain a realistic view of the school's situation. He has shared his vision and intentions for St John's with the staff, parents and pupils. New initiatives, including a forum and weekly surgery for parents, have strengthened the communication between school and the community. The parents have been extremely supportive of the school which has undergone trying times in changes of staff and building work. The parents' association has been very active; for example, it helped to fund new carpets and organised a balloon race to mark the official opening of the ICT suite.

The headteacher is organising developments well. He has set up working structures and identified where some procedures and systems, such as assessment, have not been fully understood or carried out effectively. As a result, he is aware that there is still much to do to ensure that the school has reliable, accurate data on its performance and has sustainable systems to weather changes in staffing. From January the school will have a limited pool of management experience. This poses some concern about the school's ability to move forward and the feasibility of maintaining subject leadership roles. The teachers have appreciated the opportunity to work as a team in monitoring aspects of planning and sharing experience. The review of the school's action plan and compilation of a concise schedule of work for the year has given new members of staff a rounded view of where the school needs to improve and their part in the process.

The action plan committee continues to be a vital force in checking how well the school is doing and making strategic decisions. The headteacher has kept the governors fully informed of action taken and his evaluations of the school's performance. Joint observations with LA advisers and HMI show the headteacher is accurate in his judgements of the quality of teaching and learning. The headteacher and governing body have looked at viable management and staffing structures, given the school's tight financial situation and the need to meet new statutory requirements. The school has ensured that all the teachers have time for planning, preparation and assessment and are part of the process for performance management. However, the governors have rightly considered ways to reduce staffing costs and to make optimal use of classroom and administrative expertise.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2004:

- improve leadership, management and governance in monitoring, evaluating and challenging the school; strategic and financial planning – satisfactory progress

External support

The LA and diocese have helped to finance changes which have much improved the school environment. The diocese partly funded recent repairs and building work. The reallocation of rooms has given the staff space to work and relax, and the headteacher now has a room that has a window and is large enough to accommodate several visitors. The LA has provided good support in helping the school to monitor its finances, to resolve staffing issues and to guide the teachers in subject development. For instance, consultants have provided guidance in compiling action plans and ways to develop pupils' skills of enquiry. The school's two advisers have given the headteacher much valuable support in his first term, especially in drawing up the development plan, setting targets and appointing a new teacher. They are aware of the increasing need to tailor the LA's support to the school's specific needs, especially in strengthening the teaching and the use of assessment strategies.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Refine the use of assessment to track the pupils' progress and to indicate how best to support their learning.
- Strengthen the teachers' skills in questioning pupils and encouraging them to explore their learning, interpret information and justify their answers.
- Ensure that the school has the resources it needs to deliver planned units of work and to meet individual pupils' needs.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Director of Education for Cheshire and the Diocesan Director of Education for Chester.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Sonja Øyen
H M Inspector