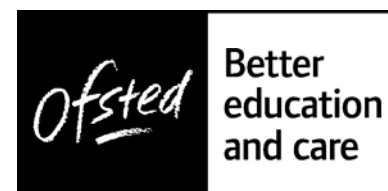


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22nd March 2006

Mrs K. Rickeard
Headteacher designate
Birtley East Community Primary School
Highfield
Birtley
Chester le Street
County Durham
DH3 1QQ

Dear Mrs Rickeard,

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BIRTLEY EAST COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Ann Wallis, Additional Inspector, to your school on 20-21st March 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in September 2005.

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

Inspectors observed the school's work, including 14 lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the former acting headteacher, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the school was placed in special measures in September 2005 there have been a number of significant changes to the management structure. An interim acting headteacher was appointed on a part-time basis; he has recently been succeeded on

this part-time basis by the headteacher designate, who is due to take up post full time immediately after Easter. The new headteacher will be taking maternity leave in the autumn term, returning in January 2007. The previous headteacher left the school immediately after it was placed in special measures.

The school is currently managing two long-term staff absences, and one further post will become vacant for September 2006.

The LA has been and remains closely involved with the school. It has not withdrawn delegation of funding, and the governing body remains constituted. The chair of the governing body intends to retire in July 2006.

Achievement and standards

Standards as measured by the results of the previous year's national tests have improved since the last inspection. The work of pupils in Year 6 is carefully monitored and current assessments indicate that they are likely to reach standards close to the school's targets in 2006. Given that since these targets were set the pupils joining the school have been lower attainers than those that have left, overall progress towards targets is satisfactory. Pupils in Year 2 are not likely to meet the targets set, but this is readily explained by analysis of variations in a few pupils' predicted scores. Progress in Key Stage 1 overall can appear poor, but this is because the baseline information used to set the targets was inflated; in the light of the corrected evidence, pupils are making satisfactory progress.

Standards across the school are improving overall, but there remain concerns about specific groups of pupils who are not yet receiving the work matched to their needs or the targeted interventions required to improve their progress. The school's analysis of pupils' progress from nursery upwards has clarified areas where more progress needs to be made; the focus is now, rightly, more on the Foundation Stage. In lessons, the progress of pupils of about average ability is largely satisfactory, but pupils who are of higher or lower ability are not making the progress of which they are capable. In the best lessons, pupils of all abilities make consistently good progress.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2005:

- improving standards in learning throughout the school – satisfactory progress

Personal development and well-being

Attendance was above average at the time of the previous inspection. Figures for the autumn term indicate that it has improved further when compared to the same term last year. Pupils' behaviour in classrooms and around the school is satisfactory overall and in some lessons it is good. Teachers manage pupils' behaviour well and

create a calm and supportive atmosphere for learning. When work is insufficiently challenging some pupils, particularly lower attaining boys, lose concentration and their pace of learning slows. Most pupils enjoy learning and have good relationships with their teachers, so lessons are conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust.

Quality of provision

Since the last inspection, the school has analysed and further identified areas for development in the quality of teaching. Very considerable work has been undertaken to monitor, support and improve practice across the school. This is beginning to show results, as the quality of teaching observed has improved since the last inspection. Fourteen lessons were observed, of which one was outstanding, ten were satisfactory, one was good and two were inadequate. The acting headteacher and headteacher designate have a good understanding of staff's strengths and areas for development, and have a clear view of what actions need to be taken over time to improve teaching further. Staff themselves are conscientious and keen to develop; they have suffered from a lack of monitoring and guidance with regard to current good practice in teaching, and they are now beginning to develop more effective practice, particularly in planning and to an extent in delivering lessons. However, developments in target setting are not fully utilised by staff to match their teaching to all pupils' needs, and marking is variable. This reduces the quality of teaching overall, and prevents even well planned lessons becoming good.

A review by the LA identified key issues in the Foundation Stage. Some of these have now been resolved - for example, inaccurate assessment data has been corrected - but concerns about the quality of teaching remain. Although joint planning time for staff has been made available, it remains difficult to develop the Foundation Stage appropriately. This is partly because of the considerable distance between the nursery and Reception classes. Plans have been drawn up for incorporating the nursery into the main school. These are appropriate and good quality and should be actioned as soon as possible.

A new assessment system has been put into place since the last inspection and teachers are now making satisfactory use of data on the pupil's attainment to track progress and plan future learning. However this has yet to become embedded in the work of the school and have an impact on pupils' standards and achievement, particularly with regard to matching work carefully to individual pupils' needs. There is not enough challenge for higher ability pupils and not enough support for lower ability or underachieving pupils. This considerably reduces the impact of improvements in teaching. Although the development of assessment is a priority area for the autumn term, it could usefully be brought forward to support the positive developments in teaching.

Systems for identifying and meeting the needs of pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are not fully developed. The most recent co-ordinator for this area has been absent since soon after taking up post, and developments

have not progressed in her absence. Although external support provides specific work for individual pupils, the lack of work consistently matched to their needs in class holds back their progress. As some classes have approximately half their pupils identified as needing some additional help, this is an area which requires urgent attention.

Most pupils follow a balanced curriculum which meets their needs. However, in Year 6 pupils follow an intensive revision programme for about ten weeks before they take national Key Stage 2 tests. This equips them well with the knowledge and skills needed for test success but it does limit the breadth of their curriculum. The Year 6 curriculum is enriched by 'booster' classes, taught by the link teacher from a local secondary school; these meet the needs of pupils of all abilities well. The personal, social and health education programme contributes well to pupils' understanding of how to stay healthy and safe. Provision for multicultural education is at the same stage as it was at the previous inspection.

Care, guidance and support for pupils continues to be satisfactory and of great importance to the school. In terms of academic development, it is strong higher up the school, but variable elsewhere. Classwork for the oldest pupils is closely matched to test requirements and their progress is carefully monitored. They know what level they are working at and how to improve their work. Clear targets have been set for all pupils so they know what they need to do to take the next steps in their learning. Parents also know these targets and as a result are better able to support their children's learning. The link teacher helps to ensure a smooth transition for Year 6 pupils to secondary school.

The school environment has improved considerably. As well as a programme of repairs and refurbishment, staff have worked very hard to develop interesting and attractive displays in class and around the school. The pupils' learning environment is now bright and stimulating.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2005: satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

Leadership and management have improved greatly since the school was placed in special measures. The school lacked many of the most basic structures and systems; for example, assessment, target setting and tracking of pupils' progress were minimal or non-existent, and there was no monitoring of the quality of teaching. In a very short time, the acting headteacher gathered and analysed a range of data, and established systems to enable the school to operate effectively. This was a very considerable achievement. While many of these systems are still so recent that they cannot yet demonstrate their effectiveness, they are well designed and now used by staff. There is every indication that they will develop effectively.

The headteacher, well supported by LA personnel, undertook a comprehensive review of the school immediately on taking up post. This raised some key issues,

notably some inadequate practice and inaccurate assessment of pupils in the Foundation Stage. These issues have been added to those raised by the school's inspection, and are included in the LA's statement of action and the school's strategic plans. The quality of school evaluation – by both the LA and the school's leadership and management – is now very high. All those involved, including the headteacher designate, have a secure knowledge of the school's strengths and weaknesses; this is well supported by the evidence and confirmed by the findings of this monitoring visit. The written plans and evolving day-to-day strategies are well matched to the evaluation issues, and this aspect of the improvement process is a clear and very significant strength.

The headteacher designate has only been in post for a short period, but already has a very firm grasp of the issues and a clear vision for the future. She has the necessary leadership and management skills to take the school forward. The school is now well placed to continue to improve. The only significant threat to leadership and management is the current lack of clarity regarding arrangements to manage the period of the new headteacher's maternity leave. This needs to be resolved as soon as possible, ensuring that continuity is maintained and the momentum of improvement is not lost.

The acting headteacher has significantly improved the school's financial management, in particular by using funding properly, to support the pupils' experience of learning. For instance he has used a significant underspend in the capital budget to fund sorely needed repairs to the fabric of the school. However he rightly removed pupils from a very poor quality outdoor classroom, containing asbestos; this is now derelict and is potentially a significant hazard to health and safety. It needs to be safely removed.

Since the last inspection the role of curriculum co-ordinators has been developed well. Literacy and numeracy co-ordinators have received good support from the LA's advisors and consultants. The results of tests and assessments have been analysed, weaknesses, for example in writing, have been identified and lessons are now more focused on improving these weaker areas. Scrutiny of numeracy work has revealed some variations in the way pupils do calculations. In response to this a useful booklet for teachers and parents has been produced entitled 'Maths Methods' to promote a shared and consistent approach to numeracy. A detailed development plan is in place to ensure all pupils make full use of information and communication technology. Many teachers already make good use of data projectors and electronic whiteboards and more training is planned to develop this expertise further. Although a new science policy is in place, no support has yet been received to enable science to be assessed consistently and accurately across all year groups.

The governing body is committed to the school and provides satisfactory support. It has not provided sufficient challenge to the school, although it is now fully aware of the need for this. It is working well with the acting headteacher and headteacher designate. A positive sign is the recent co-option of parent governors and the high level of interest in these posts shown by the community. There is a need to ensure a

high quality appointment to the post of chair when the present chair retires; this should be done jointly by the LA and the school.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2005:

- improving the most senior leadership and management in the school – good progress
- improving the school's self-evaluation procedures and act on findings to set priorities – good progress
- improving school improvement planning – outstanding progress
- improving financial management – good progress

External support

The LA's statement of action is clear and comprehensive, and well matched to the needs of the school. Since the last inspection, the LA's focus on gathering and evaluating evidence has been particularly strong, and has contributed well to the very clear ongoing analysis and development. The LA has made a very considerable commitment to the school, in terms, for example, of advisory time; this has been prompt, well focused, and has shown positive results. This support is rightly valued by the school and governing body.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Quality of LA's statement of action - good

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue to improve provision in the Foundation Stage.
- Focus on meeting the needs of high ability pupils, and pupils who have learning difficulties or who are underachieving.
- Develop assessment and marking to support and extend current improvements in teaching.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Gateshead LA.

Yours sincerely

Andrea Lyons
H M Inspector