

POST-VISIT LETTER

Mrs E Williams (Headteacher)
Birchwood CE Primary School
The Mount
Admirals Road
Birchwood
Warrington
WA3 6QG

13 January 2006

Dear Mrs Williams

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BIRCHWOOD C of E PRIMARY SCHOOL

Following my visit with Mr Ron Bulman, Additional Inspector, to your school on 11 and 12 January, 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 June 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and senior staff, pupils, a parent representative, governors and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the inspection in June 2005, an experienced deputy headteacher has been seconded from another local school to support the headteacher and leadership team during the continued long-term absence of the school's deputy. Three new temporary appointments, one teacher and two additional teaching assistants, have been made. Although the stability of teaching staff has improved slightly since the last inspection, with a reduction in short and long-term absences, there remains some uncertainty about potential staffing changes. The school continues to receive

considerable support from the LA, including advice and training from additional consultants and advisers and the support of an associate headteacher.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English, mathematics and science remain too low. The school's assessments of Year 2 pupils in summer 2005 showed a modest increase in the proportion achieving expected levels in reading, writing and mathematics, although these were still below average. The 2005 national test results for Year 6 pupils in all three core subjects indicated a further decline since 2004. Less than half of the pupils achieved expected levels in English and mathematics, with a particular downturn in English results over the previous year. Even taking into account those pupils' significantly below average overall attainment at the end of Year 2, this represented inadequate progress for many of them.

At Key Stage 1, girls are achieving slightly better than boys, whilst there is little difference between boys and girls at the end of Key Stage 2. A low proportion of pupils achieved the higher levels at either Year 2 or Year 6, particularly in English.

In lessons, pupils made satisfactory progress due to sound teaching with some strong features and generally positive attitudes to learning. Vulnerable pupils and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities made similar progress to their peers due to appropriate support by teaching assistants, although some tasks could have been better modified to match their skill levels, particularly in literacy. Higher attaining pupils also made satisfactory progress but there were few opportunities for their skills to be extended further by providing tasks with greater challenge.

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

- Improve the achievement of pupils and raise standards in English, mathematics and science - inadequate progress

Personal development and well-being

Pupils are generally well behaved and considerate, showing care when moving in and around the building. Many enjoy school, deriving pleasure and satisfaction from working in the most stimulating lessons. The majority want to learn, but some lessons fail to engage their enthusiasm. Whilst attendance figures remain persistently lower than average overall, punctuality is showing some improvement due to the school's strong emphasis and monitoring of this.

Many pupils' personal development benefits from activities provided in and out of school, although they say they would like more. Environmental awareness is apparent in the efforts of the green council to improve pupils' play facilities.

Pupils have very limited awareness of the wider and world community but this is raised in assemblies, charity work and displays in school; the school rightly recognises the urgent need to maximise its social and community functions.

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

- Improve levels of attendance and punctuality – satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall and sometimes good. Relationships between staff and pupils are good, and most pupils work well independently in groups or pairs when required. When the teaching is stimulating, engaging and moving along at a brisk pace pupils make good progress. Teaching which is merely satisfactory fails to engage many pupils as actively as is required to improve their progress at a fast enough rate to make up any lost ground.

In the most effective lessons, starter activities are relevant, information and communications technology (ICT) is used well, teachers use questioning skilfully, and due attention is given to the range of attainment in the group. Lively teaching offers presentations and plenary sessions which are brisk and to the point. A good balance of teacher-led and independent activities keeps classes busy and productive.

The satisfactory lessons are less imaginative, the pace lacks urgency and teachers take insufficient account of different levels of ability. Pupils are compliant rather than excited and involved in their learning, so some lose concentration.

The school's recent programmes of training and development are beginning to improve the quality and range of teaching styles. Teaching staff keep adequate records of pupils' achievements while currently seeking ways of using assessment to promote learning. The adoption of a wide range of assessment schemes is not fully effective, since the policies are insufficiently selective and not yet supplemented by astute, continuous and shared assessment designed to direct pupils' learning.

The curriculum is satisfactory and meets statutory requirements. Provision is based on sound schemes of work which meet many pupils' needs in most subjects. However, the basic skills of literacy and numeracy require further development, as does science, which aspires only to modest attainment targets at present. The use of ICT has developed and many teachers make good use of the available interactive whiteboards.

Intervention programmes are being used well to identify and support those pupils who need additional help with their learning. The Intensifying Support Programme has been successfully introduced so that staff are more aware of their shared responsibility for the rigorous monitoring and raising of standards. There is, however, insufficient emphasis on the needs of the most able pupils.

Leadership and management

The governors' action plan was produced through collaboration between the headteacher, staff and a governors' committee. The improvement plans are very detailed although the number of sub-sections and quantity of planned actions in each of these make the main foci less clear and the timescales for review unrealistic. The sheer number of planned activities inevitably leads to some being postponed from the school's original time frame, potentially leading to a backlog in the future. The plans would benefit from being revisited and shortened in order to focus clearly on the key priorities which will lead to quantifiable improvements for the pupils.

With the support of the local education welfare officer, the school is monitoring more closely pupils' attendance patterns. Concerns are followed up with individual families at the earliest possible stage, although this is not yet having the desired effect of raising levels of attendance. Governors have attended to previous omissions in their annual report to parents and in the school prospectus.

The headteacher and senior leaders are beginning to develop self-evaluation systems, although these are not yet sufficiently robust to provide clear and accurate evidence of the impact of the school's actions on the areas for improvement. Through joint lesson observations with LA advisers, the headteacher has agreed an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning in the school. The termly monitoring of actions taken so far does not clearly point to where evidence can be found of positive impact on pupils' achievement or strength of leadership.

There has been a recent review of the staffing structure which reflects the school's commitment to new ways of working and provides a coherent overview of staff responsibilities. The seconded deputy headteacher is providing a significant and positive contribution to the school's leadership team. She is taking a leading role in developing teaching and learning and simplifying assessment systems to improve their effectiveness. The leadership team and staff acknowledge the need to refine and improve teaching and learning to the higher quality which is required to improve pupils' achievements at a quicker pace. Middle managers are developing their skills through appropriate professional development and the support provided by the LA, although the impact of these is not yet being seen in improved outcomes for pupils.

The school has satisfactory capacity to improve.

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

- address key weaknesses of leadership, management and governance of the school - satisfactory progress
- ensure rigorous monitoring of attendance and attend to omissions in the school prospectus and governors' report to parents – satisfactory progress

External support

The school has received effective support from the LA, which was instrumental in appointing the seconded deputy headteacher and providing additional support by an associate headteacher and primary strategy consultant. The LA has also funded an extra teaching assistant to work with parents on improving attendance. A project team has been formed to take responsibility for managing and monitoring actions for improvement. The LA had already exercised its powers to appoint additional governors to the school in 2004, and has more recently provided training for the governing body. This has been instrumental in building the capacity of the governors to hold the school to account for the quality of education provided.

The LA's statement of action is succinct and appropriate. It demonstrates a clear identification and understanding of the school's difficulties and need for improvement. The statement summarises actions already taken both before and since the school was placed in special measures, and outlines those planned to continue over the next two years. An appropriate support plan identifies specific actions, resource costings, personnel responsibilities and timescales although it does not include clear criteria by which the LA will be able to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of its support.

The LA has provided a good quality commentary on the governors' action plan, identifying its strengths and correctly pointing out areas where improvements can be made, with the intention of supporting the governors in doing this. The target date of June 2007 for the school's removal from special measures is appropriate.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures– inadequate

Quality of LA's statement of action - satisfactory

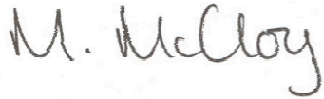
Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve pupils' achievements in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science.
- Improve attendance.
- Improve the quality of the school's self-evaluation, to include effective use of assessment procedures.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. McCloy". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'M' and a trailing 'y'.

Mrs Marguerite McCloy

H M Inspector