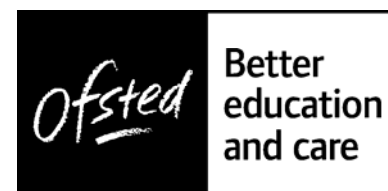


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15 June 2006

Mrs Rickeard  
Headteacher  
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 to your school on 6 June 2006 with Jane Randall and Margaret Shepherd Additional Inspectors, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second 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, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and staff, the chair of governors and representatives from the local authority.

### **Context**

There had been only a comparatively short time between this visit and the previous inspection visit. Within that time a number of developments have been begun, but naturally are at very early stages.

The headteacher took up post full time at Easter. The school has recently appointed a full-time class teacher, with additional responsibility for special educational needs and gifted and talented pupils, to take up post in September 2006. One further teaching post is currently advertised, together with two play worker posts. Arrangements to cover the headteacher's maternity leave are not finalised, but are in hand and are appropriate. The local authority (LA) has not appointed a replacement chair of governors, despite the imminent departure of the current chair. This threatens the continuity of the school's improvement process, and is a very significant concern.

### **Achievement and standards**

The standards achieved by pupils have risen slightly since the last inspection, judged by the quality of pupils' written work and lesson observations. Pupils of average ability are more consistently making satisfactory progress and standards have improved particularly in calculations. Pupils' understanding of their recent learning is more secure than at the previous inspection, reflecting the school's developments in assessment and planning. However, while the picture with regard to average ability pupils is continuing to improve, the progress of lower and higher ability pupils has remained as it was at the previous visit and therefore the gap between these groups is beginning to widen.

The progress of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is inconsistent. Where these children make satisfactory progress the tasks match their particular needs well and children gain confidence by discussing their work with children of similar ability. Where progress is unsatisfactory, the work is too difficult for them and they lose concentration because the learning is not based closely enough on their previous skills and understanding. Progress of the more able children is inadequate due to low expectations from teachers. Tasks that teachers provide are too easy for these children's capabilities and the level of questioning both in whole-class sessions and in group work does not provide enough challenge to extend their thinking.

Standards in literacy vary across the school, with pockets of good practice, for example in Year 4 where standards are above average in extended writing, and dips in, for example Year 5, where they are below average.

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**

Pupils' behaviour is generally good, and there have been noticeable improvements, for example in Year 5, where pupils' attitudes to learning and ability to concentrate have improved significantly. Pupils are courteous and helpful, and they are enthusiastic about the very recent developments, such as playground and listening buddies, which are intended to allow them much greater involvement in the running

of the school. Behaviour at lunchtimes is at least satisfactory and sometimes good, but there is little evidence of extended social play. The recruitment of two play workers is under way to address this issue, which is a positive and well focused development. Attendance has declined slightly since the last inspection. This is largely the result of short-term or occasional day absences authorised by parents. The school is well aware of this, and is now ensuring that existing arrangements for following up such absences are fully and promptly utilised.

### **Quality of provision**

The quality of teaching has improved since the last inspection. In particular, the planning and structure of lessons has continued to improve, and is more consistent across the school. There is greater reference to learning objectives, and more confident and effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) both in the classroom, through interactive whiteboards, and in whole-class lessons in the ICT suite. Fourteen lessons were observed, of which eleven were satisfactory, two were good, and one was inadequate. Good lessons were characterised by continuity of learning: the work was clearly related to children's previous activities and was meaningful to them, and was well planned to be developed further in future lessons. Teachers made explicit teaching points which arose directly out of practical activities or pupils' own work. They used discussion well to extend pupils' learning through reference to related learning and good use of technical terms and more demanding vocabulary.

There were two key areas which reduced the effectiveness of most lessons. One was a weakness in the concluding plenary sessions, which tended to lack purpose and focus. The other was a lack of effectiveness in using assessment information to plan lessons. Staff tend to focus on what pupils have previously been taught, rather than assessing what pupils have learnt, what they found difficult, and what they need to do next. In consequence, activities did not match the abilities and previous experience of too many pupils, primarily but not exclusively at each end of the ability range. However, teachers are beginning to use assessment of individual pupils more effectively in lessons to check their understanding of what they have been taught.

The curriculum remains satisfactory in terms of breadth and balance overall, and the Year 6 pupils are now being offered much more interesting and varied activities. Their curriculum, and that of pupils in Year 5, is being enriched by an exchange by which Year 5 pupils experience the more demanding work of Year 6 and the Year 6 pupils focus on artistic and cultural projects. The science curriculum lacks sufficient attention to Attainment Target 1, scientific enquiry.

The quality of provision in the Foundation Stage is improving in some areas. A new system of assessing and recording learning is now in place and is appropriate, but is only just becoming effective. The medium-term planning is rightly being revised. Some good work has taken place in both Nursery and Reception in developing well set out and lively classrooms with a good range of activities. However, although resources are adequate, many are dated, and Reception children do not have ready access to an outside area for learning. The physical separation of Nursery from

Reception continues to obstruct the effective development of joint working practices. The quality of teaching in Reception class is good. There were no lesson observations in the Nursery.

The school has extended its assessment systems effectively in reading, and now has up-to-date information on every child. Based on this, there are clear plans to extend the support given to identified groups of children who would benefit from additional support to extend their skills. The headteacher and literacy co-ordinator have also analysed the test results of the children in Key Stage 2 to identify the different rates of progress they have made during the year. They have also identified key strengths and weaknesses in the children's knowledge and understanding. This analysis has been used effectively to determine the improvements needed in teaching and learning.

Care, guidance and support for pupils continue to be priorities for the school, and have improved with the introduction of target setting for individual children. This is still in its infancy, however, and whilst children understand that they have targets in literacy and numeracy, many are unsure about their exact content. Teachers are not referring to targets during lessons, which considerably reduces the effectiveness of the process because children are not striving to improve their work and increase their rate of progress. Teachers' marking is inconsistent, with some good practice, particularly in Year 4 and Year 6. Overall, however, it does not indicate well enough what children need to do to improve.

Systems for identifying and meeting the needs of pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are beginning to be developed. These pupils' individual education plans are detailed and provide useful suggestions for resources as well as activities to match their particular needs. However, when new plans are produced they do not build systematically enough on the learning that has taken place in the previous term. There is a range of strategies for assessing individual children's progress when they are withdrawn from the classroom. These systems do not provide enough data to enable the school to evaluate the effectiveness of this provision on a weekly or termly basis.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in September 2005: Improving standards in learning throughout the school: satisfactory progress

## **Leadership and management**

The headteacher's leadership has been good, with some outstanding features. The vast majority of targets in the school's action plan have been met successfully, and any minor delays are readily explicable and appropriate alternative strategies have been established. The headteacher has a very strong grasp of the key developments needed to improve teaching and learning. There is excellent monitoring of the quality of teaching, together with good support and challenge on individual and school-wide issues, and effective redeployment of staff to capitalise on their skills. The headteacher's knowledge of the school's strengths and areas for development is outstanding, as is her strategic planning and management of the key operational

factors needed to make change happen. The management of finance and resources continues to be strong. Plans are clear and support school improvement well, for example through effective use of funding to enable specific members of staff to demonstrate or develop key skills.

Middle management is less well developed. The role of phase co-ordinators, and that of the deputy headteacher, have historically been limited, and remain so. Although staff are committed, enthusiastic and hard-working, there is too great a focus on day-to-day management and insufficient strategic focus and responsibility. There are plans in hand to re-organise and clarify the role of the phase co-ordinators for the autumn term. There has been considerable support from the LA and some good recent developments in managing the core subjects, such as an analysis of reading data. Co-ordinators have begun to develop their skills well and are aware of the need to extend their roles to embed the many recent positive developments fully in school-wide practice.

Overall, the picture with regard to the school's leadership and management has improved very significantly, and in terms of the headteacher's capability is now secure. However, the underdeveloped middle management roles, combined with an inevitable period of transition during the headteacher's maternity leave, mean that the school is vulnerable to a slowing down of the improvement process.

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 – outstanding progress
- improving school improvement planning – good progress
- improving financial management – good progress.

### **External support**

The LA has provided good support in terms of monitoring and advice on improving the quality of teaching, and consultation on a wide range of general management issues. However, it is not providing adequate support to the school in respect of the governing body, which still lacks a designated chair despite the imminent departure of the existing chair. This could compromise the school's ability to maintain its current level and rate of improvement and should be rectified immediately.

### **Main Judgements**

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- The priorities for improvement remain largely the same as in those identified in the inspection in September 2005, and in the previous monitoring letter. However, within that, the school should focus intensively in the immediate future on improving the use of assessment data to match teaching to pupils' abilities and prior learning.
- Clarify and extend the roles of subject and phase co-ordinators.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrea Lyons  
**H M Inspector**