



11 May 2006

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

Dear Mrs Williams

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BIRCHWOOD CE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Following my visit with Denise Shields and Jeffery Plumb, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 9 and 10 May 2006, 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 June 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 work of the school, scrutinised documents including a wide sample of pupils' work and met with the headteacher and senior staff, pupils, parent representatives and the chair of governors.

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection in January 2006 the school has continued to have the support of an experienced seconded deputy headteacher and the governors are now in a position to be able to recruit a permanent deputy with effect from September. This has contributed to the improved stability of the teaching staff. The local authority (LA) continues to support the school with additional input from consultants, advisers and an associate headteacher.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English, mathematics and science remain below average, but are rising. Overall, progress in these subjects is now satisfactory across the school. This shows a marked improvement since the last monitoring visit. However, a small but hard core of pupils under perform because of their poor attendance. They have gaps in their learning because they do not catch up on missed work. The vast majority of pupils in Year 6 make good progress in writing and spelling. Higher attaining Year 6 pupils make rapid gains in the important writing skills of text and organization, and composition and effect. This indicates that the strategies put in place to raise achievement in writing are beginning to bite. The Year 6 teacher has a good understanding of how the national test paper is marked and uses this knowledge effectively in setting pupils targets to improve their work.

In mathematics standards are improving but too few pupils by Year 6 are confident in demonstrating how they have worked out their answer. The school is working hard to encourage pupils to show the method used in arriving at the answer in their work. Their problem-solving skills are improving, but the proportion of pupils working within the higher level in Year 6 is low. Although progress in science is satisfactory overall some pupils under perform because they do not finish their work; a number make too few predictions when carrying out an investigation. A lack of detailed explanations prevents some pupils from reaching a higher level in science. Pupils are making good progress in art and design, information and communication technology (ICT) and physical education (PE). Those pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress against the specific literacy and numeracy targets set for them in their individual education plans.

In lessons seen pupils made at least satisfactory and sometimes good progress because planned activities were generally well matched to pupils' needs.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in January 2006:

- Improve pupils' achievements in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science – satisfactory progress

Personal development and well-being

Pupils behave well in and around the school. This is mainly due to the positive and caring relationships between adults and children, but also because pupils' behaviour is skilfully managed throughout the school. The ethos and distinctiveness of the school as a Christian community are evident, and the school's mission statement is at the forefront of all that it does.

Pupils are usually polite and friendly and get along well with each other. Almost all pupils enjoy school, especially practical lessons. Most lessons now engage their enthusiasm and they want to learn. Pupils spoken to during the inspection said, 'Teachers are funny and friendly and make lessons fun.'

Pupils say they really enjoy the activities outside the school day and are content with the range offered. The school council and the green committee feel their views are listened to and that they make a difference to school life, for instance through the recent introduction of healthy snacks and the improvements made to the school garden. Their contribution to the local and wider community is more limited and restricts their understanding of their responsibilities as young citizens.

Good progress has been made to implement rigorous systems to monitor attendance and punctuality. This is resulting in small improvements in attendance figures although rates remain below the national average overall. One factor contributing to slower improvement at the end of the autumn term was a flu virus that had affected many schools in the locality. Good systems to encourage pupils to arrive at school on time have brought about satisfactory improvements in punctuality. Despite the school's strenuous efforts a small but significant minority of pupils are persistently late or do not attend regularly and this holds back their achievement. Parents are beginning to appreciate the importance of informing the school of the reasons for their child's absence, so that fewer morning phone calls are necessary from the school to follow up when notification has not been received.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in January 2006:

- Improve attendance—satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall. This is an improvement on the proportion of good teaching seen at the time of the last monitoring inspection. The strong features evident then are now present in the majority of lessons. The impact of recent staff training can be seen in the consistency of teachers' effective use of questioning skills to move pupils' learning on more quickly. Teachers' planning ensures that activities are more sharply matched to the specific learning needs of the pupils in the class. Teachers have become better at marking pupils' work and providing more specific comments to inform them exactly what they need to do to improve. This has paid dividends in raising achievement in writing. On the rare occasion where teaching has weaknesses, the pedestrian pace slows learning and pupils become fussy and lose concentration. Overall, pupils are much more engaged in and excited by their learning than at the time of the last visit, and there is greater emphasis on providing for those pupils identified as gifted and talented.

Innovative and exciting curriculum developments have increased pupils' motivation and they say that they enjoy their learning. Flexible planning ensures that excellence and enjoyment are promoted, whilst maintaining the emphasis on basic skills in literacy and numeracy. Some high quality writing came out of a recent project on Egypt, which engaged parents and pupils in the learning process. Imaginative whole-school projects have led to a significant improvement in pupils' writing. The school is identifying concerns at an earlier stage and taking action to improve achievement; for example, in establishing target groups to raise standards in English and mathematics.

Leadership and management

Since the last monitoring inspection, the governors' action plan has been amended to improve clarity; it is now clearly focused on the school's three key priorities for improvement. Governors are involved in the monitoring of the school's progress through the reports from the governors action group.

The headteacher and seconded deputy headteacher work well together: staff morale and teamwork are strong and an air of optimism and enthusiasm is evident across the school. Staff are committed to providing an attractive learning environment within a happy and caring atmosphere. Communication

and relationships with parents are positive, and this has been enhanced through the work of a parent council, which meets regularly.

Middle managers have an increased awareness of their key role in leading staff teams to develop the curriculum and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. They are developing their ability to check the impact of the school's actions, for instance in the monitoring of teachers' planning.

The school is introducing strategies for self-evaluation which give an increasingly accurate view of its effectiveness. Strengths and areas for improvement are correctly identified and links to sources of evidence are clear. Presently, the self-evaluation is led by the headteacher and deputy, with the views of parents, pupils, staff and governors taken into account. The school is aware that there is scope for team leaders to be more actively involved in contributing to rigorous analysis of the impact of the school's actions on raising pupils' achievement.

The school has recently simplified its assessment procedures to improve their effectiveness. This is a positive development, although the tracking of progress and setting of targets for individuals and groups of pupils are in the early stages at present. A member of the leadership team has recently been given the responsibility to drive this initiative forward.

The school's positive ethos and the increased confidence, determination and teamwork of senior leaders and all staff indicate that the school has good capacity to improve.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in January 2006:

- Improve the quality of the school's self-evaluation, to include effective use of assessment procedures – satisfactory progress

External support

The LA has continued to provide effective support to the school. Since the last monitoring inspection, the LA's action plans have been amended to include success criteria by which the impact of its support can be evaluated.

The allocation of additional time for consultants to work alongside the leadership team and all staff has been instrumental in building their confidence and capacity for further improvement.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

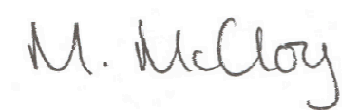
Priorities for further improvement

The school should continue with its efforts to:

- 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



Mrs Marguerite McCloy
H M Inspector