



18 May 2006

Mr H Kennedy
Headteacher
Black Horse Hill Junior School
Saughall Massie Road
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Wirral
Merseyside
CH48 6DR

Dear Mr Kennedy

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BLACK HORSE HILL JUNIOR SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Ronald Bulman, Additional Inspector, to your school on 16 and 17 May 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 November 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, nominated staff, groups of pupils, the chair of governors, the co-ordinator for special educational needs and a representative from the local authority (LA). Informal discussions were also held with other members of staff and pupils.

Context

Staffing is now more stable at the school than it was during the inspection in November. The school has recently reviewed its staffing levels because of an anticipated decline in pupil numbers.

Achievement and standards

In 2005, the progress made by pupils was inadequate. Too few pupils achieved as well as they could have in the national tests at the end of Key Stage 2. This was particularly true of mathematics; the school was ranked in the bottom five per cent of schools nationally in terms of progress made by pupils. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) also made inadequate progress.

Since then the rate of progress has improved. During the visit, pupils made satisfactory progress in nearly all the lessons; some made good progress. However, in a number of lessons the more able pupils were set work which was not challenging enough. In the best lessons, good progress was made when work and resources were carefully matched to the abilities of pupils in the class. In mathematics lessons pupils made satisfactory progress overall.

Pupils with LDD are beginning to make satisfactory progress because of more sharply focused individual education plans, good support from teaching assistants, and a more accurate tracking system, which sensibly draws on the whole-school system of assessing progress.

Individual targets are set for each pupil and their progress is assessed in English and mathematics each half term. While this identifies pupils at risk of underachieving in each class, teachers do not use this assessment information consistently or regularly to set suitable work for pupils. Moreover, such information is not used routinely to inform whole-school planning, and arrangements for checking that assessment information is used well by all teachers are inconsistent.

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

- Keep a careful and more accurate track of pupils' progress so that more precise targets can be set for each year group - satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' good personal development reflects the qualities required for the school's Investors in People award. Pupils are well behaved, co-operative and articulate in class, expressing their opinions and suggestions with confidence. They show patience and persistence when tasks are demanding, even when presentations or activities are lengthy.

Many seek and execute specific responsibilities as monitors and school council members. Pupils strive to earn the team and individual commendations awarded for good work and attitudes, and take pride in the bright displays of their work around the building.

Quality of provision

Teaching is largely satisfactory and sometimes good. In the best lessons, teachers engaged pupils in varied activities, brisk discussions and matched work closely to their prior attainment. In these lessons pupils were diligent and responsive to challenge.

The less able pupils were generally well included and supported in lessons. However, the potential for progress offered by setting and grouping by ability was not fully exploited. Too often, pupils were given the same tasks with insufficient opportunity to achieve at higher levels, as occurred in a mathematical problem-solving exercise. Sometimes, the more able pupils were just given more of the same or set simple exercises such as labelling, instead of being presented with different and more challenging extension work. There was considerable variation in the style and effectiveness of lessons on similar topics, some of which were stimulating, fast paced and full of activity, while others were relatively sedentary.

Teachers have worked hard to adopt and familiarise themselves with assessment methods. There is greater awareness of the levels pupils are expected to achieve by the end of each year, and by the end of the key stage. Several teachers have visited another school to observe good practice in this area and their observations have been shared with colleagues.

Following support and training from the LA, and beneficial links with local high-attaining schools, there are more and better opportunities for pupils to apply problem-solving skills in mathematics. Lesson monitoring and subsequent helpful feedback have increased teachers' understanding of this area. The school is beginning to devise its own strategies to develop problem-solving skills. Greater opportunities exist for pupils to apply these skills in science, design and technology and physical education lessons.

The levels pupils are currently working at, and towards, have been recently shared with parents. Weekly targets, where pupils can assess their own progress in the core subjects, have been introduced. Whilst this 'traffic light' system is not yet fully embedded, pupils report that targets are generally

written in child-friendly language. This makes it easier for them to understand where they need to improve. Most know which level they are currently working at, and some can explain what they must do to improve. Marking is mostly of a celebratory nature and not enough gives pupils guidance on how to improve. As yet, there are no displays which give examples of work at a certain standard to which pupils can aspire.

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

- Improving the teachers' expertise in the use of assessment so that all have a clear idea of the levels that pupils attain - satisfactory
- Using the information from assessments to plan work which is more exactly matched to pupils' learning needs - inadequate
- Increasing pupils' opportunities to apply their mathematical skills to solve problems – satisfactory
- Raising pupils' and teachers' expectations of pupils' progress - satisfactory

Leadership and management

The headteacher is committed to the improvement of the school. With considerable support from the LA, satisfactory progress has been made on the majority of issues identified in the inspection. The headteacher has worked hard to improve staff morale and has set an example in seeking good practice from other schools. Parents have been kept well informed.

Effective steps have been taken to tackle inadequate teaching. Some initiatives have been aimed at raising pupils' achievement, such as the increased length of literacy and numeracy lessons. It is, however, too early, to gauge the impact of this on pupils' progress.

The LA has provided support on the issue of matching work to pupils' abilities. The headteacher has set out clear expectations for improving teaching and learning for the more able but these have not been translated quickly enough into tangible improvements in the classroom. This needs urgent attention.

Planning and pupils' work are monitored more regularly. The monitoring of teaching and learning, undertaken jointly with the LA, has become more

frequent. Over time, the school needs to develop its own robust monitoring systems. There are appropriate plans to focus the teachers' performance management objectives more closely on the achievement of specific groups of pupils.

The school action plan has been well evaluated. The plan covers action in the short term and now needs to be revised. However, the identified areas for improvement are not as clearly linked to the school's intended improvement actions as they might be and there are no milestones to measure the progress of each year group towards its end-of-year targets.

The headteacher is well supported by his senior management team, which is now working more effectively than in the past. The assessment co-ordinator has led improvements to the assessment system and underachievement is much more effectively identified. The co-ordinator for special educational needs has overseen new improvements in the provision for pupils with LDD, including the introduction of a specific assessment system.

The governing body is supportive of the headteacher and is beginning to provide more challenge to the school on the issue of pupils' progress. An action committee meets regularly to oversee progress on the issues identified by the inspection.

With the continued support of the LA the school has the capacity to improve.

External support

The LA has provided considerable support to the school. Two experienced extra governors have been appointed. An additional general inspector has been assigned work with the school. He visits regularly to monitor lessons and improvement issues. Opportunities have been created for staff to observe good practice at other schools. Recently, the LA has included the school in the Intensifying Support Project which will begin in the new term.

The LA's statement of action is satisfactory and follows national guidance. The suggested removal date of the school from special measures is ambitious.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Quality of LA's statement of action – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure the more able are set challenging work.
- Develop rigorous and robust internal systems for monitoring teaching and learning.
- Make better and more consistent use of assessment systems.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services at Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council.

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
H M Inspector