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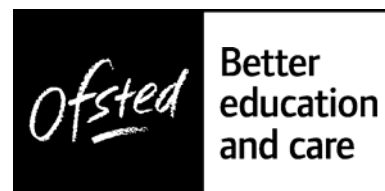
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May 2006

Mr B Vidler
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Dear Mr Vidler

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST JAMES CHURCH OF ENGLAND VOLUNTARY AIDED PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 17 and 18 May 2006 with two Additional Inspectors, Jill Bavin and Ann Taylor, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the findings of the inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in December 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 acting headteacher, nominated teachers, groups of children, governors, and representatives from the local and diocesan authorities.

Context

The school organisation remains the same. A permanent headteacher has been appointed for September 2006. A new special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) is working part time in the school. The local authority (LA) has allocated an advisory headteacher to support the school's leadership and management until the headteacher designate is in post.

Achievement and standards

At the time of the last inspection, standards in Key Stage 1 had been in decline for three years. In 2005 standards were significantly below expected levels at the end of Year 2. In Key Stage 2, results had improved slowly from 2002 and in 2005 they were close to national average. A majority of children had made satisfactory progress from Year 2 to Year 6, although almost a third had made less than expected progress.

This year children entered the Foundation Stage classes with the level of skill and understanding broadly expected for their age. In previous years standards on entry have been lower, particularly in children's communication and social skills. The school's own data suggests that pupils in the Foundation Stage are making satisfactory progress. In Years 1 and 2 children's achievement is also satisfactory. The most recent test results in reading and mathematics indicate that standards have improved in Year 2. In Key Stage 2, standards and achievement are inadequate. The school's own tracking information shows that too many children are not reaching the levels expected for their age. The latest assessments of Year 6 children show that the results in the national tests will be well below the targets set by the school. There are still too few children achieving at or above the expected age-related levels. Weaknesses in teaching have resulted in underachievement and currently teaching is not good enough to accelerate progress and raise standards quickly enough.

In most lessons seen during the inspection, progress was satisfactory. Some teachers are beginning to match activities to children's different learning needs. There are still occasions however, when the pace of teaching is too slow and planning is not focused enough for children to make sufficient progress. A recent positive development is a more systematic approach to tracking children's achievement. Teachers and subject leaders are now in a position to identify those children who are not making sufficient progress. This has focused teachers on identifying those children who are falling behind. Less attention is given to ensuring that the most capable children are also reaching their potential.

The school is beginning to resolve the issue of low standards and achievement in Key Stage 1. However, underachievement remains a significant issue in Key Stage 2 and the most capable children are still not properly catered for.

Judgement

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

- Raise standards achieved in English, mathematics and science, especially at Key Stage 1 and amongst the most capable children throughout the school – inadequate progress

Personal development and well-being

Children's attitudes and behaviour are satisfactory. The school has worked hard to review its behaviour management policy and staff have benefited from the discussions this has promoted. As a result, teachers are more consistently using positive strategies for managing children's behaviour. The disruptive and disrespectful behaviour of a minority of older children reported during the last inspection was not seen on the visit. The new SENCO is making a positive contribution to helping teachers tackle specific behavioural needs that are related to learning difficulties. There are however, occasions when pupils are still not challenged sufficiently in lessons or find the teaching does not meet their needs. This causes some children to lose interest and become restless. When teaching is inadequate or when there is a lack of pace or challenge in otherwise satisfactory lessons, children lose concentration, disengage and stop learning. Behaviour around the school and at break times has improved. The school has recently acquired games equipment which is used during the lunch break. Consequently children and lunch time supervisors believe that because play is more purposeful, playground behaviour is better than it was.

Judgement

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

- Improve attitudes and behaviour of a few children in some of the junior classes – satisfactory progress

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching is now mainly satisfactory but it is not of sufficient quality to raise standards quickly. The regular monitoring of teaching and learning is starting to improve the quality of lessons, although for some teachers, there is a considerable way to go. Too much of the teaching is only satisfactory and children are not making sufficient progress. Much more teaching needs to be good if children are to make good progress and improve standards. Improving teaching is an urgent priority and a far higher proportion of good and very good teaching is required.

A small proportion of the lessons observed were good. The best teaching was characterised by objectives which stated what children needed to learn, for example, that a sensor can monitor conditions and trigger an event. In the good lessons, the new interactive whiteboards were used well, which had a positive effect on improving children's engagement, attitudes and behaviour. The pace of lessons was sharper with time limits set for pupils to complete activities. Weaker lessons were not well balanced with the teacher talking for too long, leaving limited time for children to engage in learning activities. In some lessons, the pace of learning was too slow, children drifted in and out of concentration and there was an undercurrent of restlessness. In other weak lessons, the teacher did not successfully engage children in learning because the work was not matched appropriately to their needs. Planning suitable work for children of different abilities remains an issue, although some progress has been made to improve it. In weaker lessons, there is still not

enough challenge for higher ability children or suitable activities and support for less able children. Some teachers continue to find it difficult to match the learning activities to all children in their classes. There are still too few opportunities for children to use ICT in the curriculum.

Assessment and marking procedures are improving. Teachers are more aware of the children who are underachieving and there are assessment procedures in place to measure progress. The school has yet to test the accuracy of teachers' assessments through moderation. The marking of children's work has improved but remains inconsistent. Some marking enables pupils to understand how they can improve, but other work is marked infrequently with little guidance on improvement.

The practice of using the phrases "learning objectives met, not met or partly met" is meaningless in its current context, as learning is rarely adjusted to reflect this judgement. The presentation of work is often not good enough.

The curriculum for Foundation Stage children has improved and is now more appropriate to their needs. There is a good range of child initiated learning activities provided. This represents satisfactory progress since the inspection. However, there are still some improvements to be made, for example, in using ICT more regularly, and in providing more opportunities for learning outdoors. Provision for reception children in the mixed Year 1 and Foundation Stage class is not as good as in the Foundation Stage class. The teaching approaches and learning experiences organised in the mixed age class are not as effective as those in the Foundation Stage class.

Judgement progress on the areas identified by the inspection in December 2005

- Improve the use of assessment and marking so that teachers plan their lessons more effectively to take account of what children already know - satisfactory progress
- Develop the curriculum for children in the Foundation Stage and Year 1, to help them learn more effectively through structured play activities - satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of the school were judged inadequate when the school was placed in special measures. Some improvements have been made but inadequacies remain. An advisory headteacher was appointed to support the leadership team and help the school to move forward. This has worked well with good guidance given to the acting headteacher and regular monitoring of lessons to improve teaching and learning. Teaching has improved but remains inadequate in some lessons and only satisfactory in many. The actions taken to improve consistency and quality in teaching and learning are not yet fully embedded in all classes.

A substantive headteacher has been appointed for September 2006. He is making regular visits to the school, building a working relationship with staff and governors

and planning further priorities for improvement. He has produced some fresh proposals for reporting to governors and drafted a new teaching and learning policy. Under experienced and proven leadership the school should have the capacity to improve quickly.

The school's post Ofsted action plan identifies improvement targets and actions. However, it is not matched precisely enough with the local authority plan and timescales and milestones are too loosely defined. Quantitative attainment targets are included for only three of the four core subjects. The target for improving the quality for teaching is immediate with nothing set for further improvement. Some of the quantitative targets do not match those indicated in the LA plan for action. Regular progress reviews on the key issues have been completed by the leadership team but the latest review report, although commenting on the actions taken, gives limited detail on impact and outcomes. Although established, the leadership team has yet to consolidate its knowledge and understanding of standards and achievement

The profile of subject leadership and management in English and mathematics is higher than in other subjects and the subject leaders have benefited from the support of LA consultants. The advisory headteacher has raised expectations of what is expected from all subject leaders and completed a scrutiny of subject leader files. Support for subject leadership in science and ICT is only just beginning and consequently has had less impact. Overall, some preparatory work has been completed towards establishing more effective subject leadership but monitoring and evaluation remain a weakness. The leadership team has raised the profile of accountability among subject leaders and teachers for ensuring children achieve well. There is now a common system for tracking children's progress and teachers are expected to adjust their planning following assessments in lessons, although this is not consistently applied.

Governors are better informed. They have appreciated the open and frank dialogue they have had with the advisory headteacher. Governors now receive committee papers in good time and regular written reports from the acting headteacher. They feel more confident about asking questions and seeking explanations; more questions are being asked of them. Two governors have been elected to fill vacancies and some governor training has started. An advisory governor is expected to work with the governing body in June. An audit of effectiveness revealed that amongst other things decision making, target setting, monitoring and evaluation were aspects of the governors' role that required improvement. Although governors are beginning to involve themselves more, monitoring through visiting is still limited.

Judgement

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

- Stabilise leadership and management of the school by appointing a permanent headteacher and deputy headteacher, and strengthen the senior management and governance of the school – satisfactory progress

External support

The local authority has produced a satisfactory statement of action. The statement includes all the issues in the inspection report and gives a clear indication of the actions to be taken to bring about improvement. However, the plan is not easily cross referenced to the school's plan of action. Some actions have loosely defined milestones, and success criteria, though quantitative, do not always match those set by the school. A core action group monitors and evaluates the progress made since the inspection and appropriate monitoring and evaluation procedures have been set up. The latest progress review gives an accurate summary of the improvements made and points for further development. The LA has appointed an advisory headteacher to support the school's leadership team and allocated additional school development adviser (SDA) time to the school. This support has been good and appreciated by staff and governors. Support and training have been allocated from the LA service and partners to help the school tackle the key issues. A support governor has been appointed to advise the governing body and two local schools have been nominated for good practice visits from staff.

The authority considers that the school will "no longer require special measures" by December 2007. This is cautious and not matched to the LA plan which intimates that support will be withdrawn from December 2006. The headteacher designate has a more ambitious timescale and his view is that the school will be out of special measures in the spring of 2007. It seems appropriate at this point to undertake a revision of timescales to speed up the process of improvement.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Quality of LEA's statement of action - satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed

Priorities for further improvement

- Teaching and learning to meet the targets set in the action plan
- Subject leadership and management
- Using ICT across the curriculum

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the diocesan authority and the Director of Children's Services for Essex and [as below]

Yours sincerely

Robert McKeown
H M Inspector

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