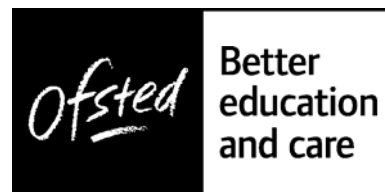


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Mr Kevin King
The Acting Headteacher
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11 July 2006

Dear Mr King

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST MARY'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Rodney Braithwaite, Additional Inspector, to your school on 5 and 6 July 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 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, senior staff, a representative from the local authority and the chair of governors. All full time teaching staff were observed and a sample of pupils' work was examined. Inspectors met with the school council and other pupils. A discussion was held with a representative from the diocesan board of education.

Context

The school continues to be managed by an acting headteacher and an acting deputy headteacher. Despite two attempts the governors have been unable to appoint a substantive headteacher. Similarly, they have been unable to appoint a deputy headteacher following a further recruitment campaign. The substantive assistant headteacher has resigned following an appointment elsewhere and will leave the school in August. As a result, the long term leadership and management team remains insecure.

Achievement and standards

Standards and achievement continue to improve and are now at least satisfactory in all areas. At the time of this visit, the school had recently received the results of the national tests for pupils age eleven and had completed their analysis of the results for those pupils age seven. These results are unvalidated data and should be used with caution at this stage. However, early indications are promising that the improvement noted in the most recent monitoring visit has been maintained and has further improved in some areas.

Standards achieved by pupils by the end of Year 2 show an improvement since 2005. Every pupil achieved the level required in speaking and listening and almost all in science. Similarly, the majority of pupils have reached the expected standard in mathematics. An impressive area of improvement is in the number of pupils reaching the higher levels in reading and writing where almost a third of all pupils were successful compared to very few in 2005.

Pupils aged 11 have also shown significant improvement in the standards they achieve. Almost all pupils reached the level expected in science, including a significant proportion reaching the higher level. Seventy-six per cent reached the expected level in mathematics. In these subjects the school has exceeded the targets set for 2006. Pupils can now use basic number work to solve increasingly advanced problems, design and conduct scientific tests, and show a sophisticated use of language, both written and spoken, to explain and discuss their thinking. The school is still slightly generous in assessing pupils' work but is increasingly accurate as a result of the better monitoring. The school has set appropriately ambitious targets for 2007.

The success in raising standards overall has however revealed where the school now needs to focus their efforts. In particular it has correctly identified higher level science for the younger pupils and standards of writing for all pupils as areas of priority. Handwriting remains satisfactory but the use of spelling strategies remains inconsistent. Despite this, many more pupils are able to: express subtle thoughts in text; use an increasing range of vocabulary; and understand sentence construction and the rules of basic grammar. For example, in Year 4 pupils were able to explain the difference

between fact and opinion in their writing about the benefits of sleep and read aloud their own text with confidence.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' behaviour and attitudes remain mainly good. Pupils describe the school as 'lovely', 'interesting' and 'enjoyable' and feel safe and secure. The enthusiastic school councillors talk a lot about wanting to make young children in the school happy and have set out playground markers in an area especially 'for the Nursery'. They talk about some bullying but feel that this is dealt with promptly by school staff. They like 'non uniform' day but do not like sitting on the carpet too long in lessons. Although a number of older pupils have informal responsibilities around the school, they do not yet have a wide range of opportunities, for example the school council is especially keen to have a wider role in school.

Attendance remains around the national average although the recent attendance record of older pupils is consistently higher than that of the youngest children. The school is working closely with local school welfare officers in order to improve the attendance of a small number of children who are persistently absent or late.

Pupils' spiritual, moral and social education remains good and a strong sense of community was evident in an observed assembly. The cultural development of the school remains satisfactory. The school is making a careful audit of resources for multi-cultural education and planning is well advanced towards better provision. Pupils are encouraged to make charitable donations, for example to a children's home in Uganda. They also have a good knowledge of the need for a healthy lifestyle. An improvement in standards, especially in mathematics, is helping to promote economic well-being but the school as yet provides few opportunities for wider development.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning in the school are now consistently good and during this visit some outstanding teaching of dance and singing was seen. This is to the credit of the staff who have worked hard to act upon advice given. The teaching of music is also a strength of the curriculum. The school has established a programme for monitoring teaching and learning in recent months which involves subject leaders and senior managers. This has provided staff with a greater understanding of what makes teaching and learning effective. Lessons have clear and shared objectives, pupils know what their learning targets are, and teachers' planning makes good provision for pupils of all abilities. Teaching assistants work effectively in all classes and are very proactive in their work with pupils.

Teachers' expectations are high and lessons are now more challenging and stimulating. Good quality assessment data is now being carefully analysed and teachers are comfortable in interpreting this information. Consequently, planning for the needs of all pupils has improved steadily. Teachers now set targets every term for pupils in English and mathematics and use this information to help pupils identify how well they are doing. Pupils understand their targets well. The school uses a group of pupils in each year group as a 'tracker group' to identify progress made in detail and to help set future targets.

The marking of pupils' work by teachers has also improved. Pupils' books show a better balance of comments and offer constructive support and guidance towards improvement. Teachers continue to encourage pupils to work independently, which many enjoy. However, some teachers and support staff have a tendency to do too much for pupils and occasionally spend too long on introducing lessons leaving little time for independent learning.

The improvement in teaching and learning is also evident in the Foundation Stage, where an effective link between the Nursery and the Reception class is now well established. A good curriculum is in place and children make good progress in their early learning goals. Improvement is due to effective teamwork and a good understanding of the needs of young children by the Foundation Stage leaders. The relationships between parents and staff are good.

The improvement in the monitoring of teaching and learning has come about because the school is increasingly focused on pupils' progress and has established a supportive ethos where the sharing of expertise is now commonplace. For example, teachers swap classes for creative afternoons to allow for specialist teaching and the senior managers in school are constructive in their lesson observations. This is increasing confidence and helping to build greater capacity in leadership.

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

- use the school's assessment information and data effectively to improve the pace of pupils' progress and to ensure all pupils achieve suitably high standards – good.

Leadership and management

Efforts to put in place a permanent and sustainable leadership group remain unsuccessful and this has restricted the progress being made by the school despite much good work being done by those currently in post. This position has continued for over a year and is unacceptable.

This does not accurately reflect the hard work being completed by the current staff. The acting deputy headteacher, in particular, continues to lead improvements with determination and energy. The assistant headteacher has supported this drive, although his impending departure has meant yet more changes to the composition of the senior management team.

The acting headteacher continues to manage the day to day responsibilities with sensitivity and experience. He is aware that, for the school to take the next step in its recovery, the managers now need to take longer term strategic decisions rather than simply improve what is currently being done. For example, the monitoring of teaching has resulted in improvements but is not yet linked to the school's priorities. Similarly, the school has produced a detailed document outlining its view of strengths and weaknesses but there is no longer term plan written to outline what it needs to do about them.

There remains instability in the senior management team within school. The actual membership is about to change again and roles and responsibilities are currently under review. Some of this change is unavoidable. There has been a start made on building the expertise of subject leaders to contribute to a review of standards and progress in their subjects but this remains at an early stage and does not yet contribute to overall school planning sufficiently well. One welcome recent development is when senior staff presented a review of standards in subjects to governors. The most recent headteacher's report is detailed.

Governors have an increasingly accurate view of the standards pupils achieve. They continue to support the staff and contribute to the life of the school and maintain all committee functions well. They are aware of the budgetary pressures building as a result of the high levels of staffing but have yet to make plans to secure the long term financial security of the school. Similarly, plans for the recruitment of senior staff are not yet sufficiently ambitious and an increasing level of challenge to school leadership to set longer term plans would be appropriate.

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

- ensure the role of the headteacher includes effective leadership of the school's priorities for improvement, including providing accurate reports on the progress to the governing body – satisfactory
- establish a senior management structure that enables staff to fulfil their responsibilities within a team approach – inadequate progress as the long term plans remain insecure although current provision is satisfactory.

External support

The school has received good support from the local authority and appreciates the high level of resources currently being deployed. However, the struggle to appoint a headteacher requires further advice and practical

support from both the local authority and the diocesan office to urgently resolve the problem.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good progress in improving standards and teaching, but satisfactory overall as the lack of a sustainable plan for leadership remains an urgent problem.

Progress since the previous monitoring inspection:

- complete a full self-evaluation of the school's progress to date and use this to set the next stage of priorities – satisfactory
- establish a timetable for staff development which includes paired observations and focuses clearly on the progress pupils are making – satisfactory
- ensure the use of assessment information is consistent across all classes – good.

Priorities for further improvement

- Secure the long term school leadership.
- Use the recently completed self-evaluation exercise to write a school improvement plan.
- Ensure pupils have a voice in contributing to school development

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the District School's Commissioner for the Diocesan Board of Education and the Director of Children's Services for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Ceri Morgan
H M Inspector