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Mrs J A Brotherton
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25 May 2006

Dear Mrs Brotherton

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF VICTORIA
PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Rodney Braithwaite and Joanna Pike, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 10 and 11 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 acting headteacher, the acting deputy headteacher, a group of pupils, the chair of governors, the headteacher designate and a representative from the local authority (LA). A telephone conversation was held with the consultant headteacher prior to the monitoring visit as she was unavailable during the visit.

Context

Since the section 5 inspection in November 2005, the headteacher has resigned from his post. The school is being led and managed by the deputy

headteacher who is the acting headteacher. Since January 2006 she has been supported by a consultant headteacher who is the headteacher of a neighbouring school. A deputy headteacher from another neighbouring school has been seconded to assist Victoria Park as acting deputy headteacher from February 2006. A substantive headteacher has been appointed and will take up his post in September 2006.

Achievement and standards

Standards remain very low. Although pupils generally made at least satisfactory progress in lessons, too many pupils are not making adequate progress over time. To a great extent this is due to the lack of accurate knowledge within the school about the levels at which pupils are working and therefore the next steps which they need to take in order to improve their achievement. Detailed data from assessments which were carried out at the start of the academic year were misplaced by the school. Coupled with the previous dearth of accurate assessment data in the school, this has been a major barrier to raising standards and to ensuring that the pupils make at least satisfactory progress. Assessment information about pupils who have learning difficulties and those who are learning English as an additional language is available but is not well used in the classroom. The acting deputy headteacher has taken swift and rigorous action to begin to remedy the situation. Baseline assessments are being carried out with all pupils. The school has sensibly involved LA consultants to moderate the teachers' assessments which is beginning to result in a more accurate profile of each pupil's needs. Each teacher is expected to have greater accountability for the progress of the pupils they teach and relevant training and support are being provided. These actions are well thought out and absolutely appropriate. Nonetheless, because of the previous lack of effective action in this essential area, the impact on raising expectations and standards has yet to be seen.

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

- raise standards and tackle underachievement in English, mathematics and science by ensuring that expectations are high for all children – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour is good across the school both in and outside lessons. Pupils are polite, for example, being quick to open doors for staff and visitors. The leadership team has set about giving pupils more responsibility. This includes the new school council and playground buddies, both of which are having a very positive impact in the school. Pupils have benefited greatly from the training they have received in preparation for these roles, gaining useful life skills such as effective communication. The school council members are thoroughly enjoying their responsibilities and are gaining self confidence because they know that their views are acted upon. Their good ideas have

resulted in a calm atmosphere in the dining hall, with tablecloths, flowers and music being introduced. One member of the school council commented, 'I have got a sense of achievement and have more self respect.' Other pupils now feel that they have a say in the school because of the council and the surveys in which they have all been involved. The introduction of playground buddies is helping pupils to play more harmoniously. Pupils feel safe and are confident that any bullying is dealt with effectively.

Crucially, pupils' work is now celebrated in a high profile way, with attractive displays in corridors and classrooms. This has raised pupils' expectations and their pride in their achievements. Many teachers help to further this by constantly building pupils' self esteem.

Pupils enjoy school and say how much they like the new themed afternoon sessions where subjects such as geography, art and mathematics are grouped together. In several lessons pupils were almost jumping out of their seats in their eagerness to contribute.

A further positive development is that at break only healthy snacks are served by the kitchen and lunches have more healthy options. This is making pupils think more carefully about their choices.

Attendance, whilst still being below the national average, is steadily improving as a result of the school's determined efforts. Staff, pupils and parents are now much more aware of the importance of regular attendance.

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

- improve attendance and make sure parents are aware of the impact of poor attendance on their children's learning – good.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning observed during this visit were mostly satisfactory and included four good lessons. This is a similar finding to that of the school's senior leadership team and the local authority advisor, all of whom have been involved in a rigorous programme of monitoring teaching since the last inspection. A clear structure for improving teaching and learning has been put in place in the last few months and this has led to improvement in some elements of provision. There has begun to be more consistency in the approach to teaching and learning across the school. Some teachers have raised their expectations of what the pupils can achieve and teachers are beginning to be held much more accountable for the progress made by pupils in their classes. Professional development targets are being established for all staff, resulting in them having a much clearer understanding of what is expected of them.

The use of assessment to inform planning is at a very early stage of development. Until teachers are familiar with, and understand, the information they have, the raising of standards and achievement will remain a slow process. The marking of work remains patchy and many pupils still need more help to understand how they are doing and how they can get better. In lessons, teachers frequently questioned pupils, but many of the questions required only brief, factual answers. More attention needs to be paid to developing pupils' speaking, for example encouraging pupils to use whole sentences where possible in order to improve their language skills.

The school has had to cope with a number of difficulties in recruiting new teachers and with unusually high levels of teacher absenteeism. Additionally, the school management team has restructured some of the teachers' day to day responsibilities. The combination of these factors has made the organisation of teaching and learning more complex than usual.

Overall, the school is laying appropriate foundations to improve teaching and learning. However, the leadership team realises that there is still much to do.

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

- put in place a whole school teaching and learning policy to bring about consistent high quality teaching across the school – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The consultant headteacher and the acting deputy headteacher have considerably strengthened the senior leadership team. They have quickly and accurately assessed the extent of the school's weaknesses and have worked with the acting headteacher to begin to take appropriate action to remedy them. The seconded senior leaders are clear about the school's priorities and their actions have been highly focused. Serious flaws in important aspects of basic management, such as inaccurate class registers and the lack of information about the pupils' achievement and attainment, have been addressed with the necessary urgency. New systems for improving staff accountability are well organised and rigorous. Each teacher has a regular meeting with a member of the leadership team and agreed actions are monitored. Senior leaders have reorganised the timetables for the summer term to try to allow staff to be clearly focused on specific subjects and ability groups. Their initial evaluation suggests that for some staff this has been successful. The leadership team has accurately evaluated the impact of their regular lesson observations and are making appropriate changes to further increase the rigour of the system.

The school has added to its previous action plan since the section 5 inspection. Many actions identified are appropriate. However, the key priorities are not always clear. The school would benefit from adopting a

straightforward and focused format for its action planning, such as that used by the LA, which would help them to track progress.

There is a lack of clarity about some aspects of staffing. The current staffing structure lacks a clear rationale and staffing needs for September are too uncertain. This issue needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency with the support of the LA.

The chair of the governing body is dedicated to his role and is committed to helping the school to secure the necessary improvements. Recent training for the governing body has greatly increased the chair's understanding of the need for the governors to provide the school with appropriate levels of challenge as well as support. Governors have begun to be better informed about standards in the school and have started to understand the serious issues relating to the pupils' progress. This has been aided by them receiving more accurate information from the school and the LA. Governors have received incomplete information about the school's finances and consequently have been unable to carry out this aspect of their role effectively.

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

- establish an effective leadership team to drive forward significant improvement – satisfactory
- organise and carry out a rigorous whole school programme of monitoring, evaluation and review – satisfactory.

External support

Since the section 5 inspection the local authority has committed considerable additional resources to the school. The two seconded leaders have had a significant positive impact on the school in a short period of time. The LA adviser is very committed to the school. Since being linked to the school in January she has quickly become very familiar with the issues and has an accurate understanding of what needs to happen next. She has been very supportive of the senior team at the same time providing them with a suitable level of challenge. She has a good knowledge of the work which her LA colleagues are carrying out in the school and is well aware of the need to coordinate this support to ensure that it is coherent and manageable. The LA is in the process of appointing three additional governors.

The LA's statement of action is satisfactory. The statement meets Department for Education and Skills requirements. It is well structured and is closely aligned with the school's key areas for improvement. For some of the actions it is clearly noted not only who will monitor and evaluate, but also how this will be done. However, this is not consistent throughout the plan, for some actions only the personnel who will monitor are identified and not the method of monitoring and evaluation. The timeline which indicates when actions are due to be completed is useful. Importantly, a task group meets regularly both

to hold the school to account and to evaluate the effectiveness of the LA's own actions. The LA's target date for the removal of special measures is realistic.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Quality of LA's statement of action – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed only after consultation with HMI.

Priorities for further improvement

- Clarify staffing needs and ensure that the necessary staff are appointed ready for September.
- Ensure that the improved assessment data is collated and then used by staff to begin to ensure that pupils consistently make progress which is at least satisfactory.
- Ensure that governors receive full and accurate information about the school, including pupils' progress, staffing issues and finance, so that they can provide the leadership team with the appropriate level of challenge and support.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education and Children's Services for Sandwell.

Yours sincerely

Susan Morris-King
H M Inspector