



20 October 2006

Mrs Janice Schofield
The Headteacher
Parsons Down Infant School
Paynesdown Road
Thatcham
RG19 3TE

Dear Mrs Schofield

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF PARSONS DOWN INFANT AND NURSERY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Kay Charlton, Additional Inspector, to your school on 11 and 12 October 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 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, including lessons or parts of lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and deputy headteacher, other members of staff, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority. Discussions with pupils were held over lunch, and during lessons.

Context

The context of the school is largely unchanged from the time of the Section 5 inspection in December 2005 and from the first monitoring visit in May 2006. One teacher has left and been replaced with a temporary appointment. The governing body has experienced many changes and there are currently three vacancies.

Achievement and standards

Children's skills when they start school vary greatly within and between years. Relatively few children have particularly well developed skills on entry. The children currently in the Foundation Stage have made a sound start to school life and already show much enjoyment in learning and follow the daily routines confidently. Staff in the Foundation Stage pay close attention to developing children's language and communication skills and these are developing well. By the time children leave the Foundation Stage and start Year 1, their attainment is generally similar to what can be expected of them for their ages but with few attaining highly.

In the 2005 Year 2 tests, standards in reading and mathematics were broadly average. In writing, despite a slight rise in 2005 from 2004, standards were still significantly below average. The 2006 results were lower than those in 2005 and very few pupils reached above expected levels. In the past, because records were not analysed sufficiently closely, the school found it difficult to judge how good pupils' progress was from starting in the Foundation Stage to the end of Year 2. Now, with improved assessment systems, the school can show that virtually all pupils in Year 2 in 2005-6 made at least satisfactory progress in reading, writing and mathematics. Pupils' overall progress, however, is not yet adequate from entry to the end of Year 2.

Pupils' work in lessons shows that they are generally making satisfactory progress but that there is still more work to be done to enable some pupils to catch up and reach the levels of which they are capable. This is particularly true for the more able pupils. The uneven progress across Years 1 and 2 and between classes within a year group, noted at the time of the last visit in May 2006 is no longer as apparent. There are still too few occasions or lessons, however, in which pupils make good progress. Standards of presentation have improved since the last visit. The rate at which pupils make learning gains in writing has also improved and shows the impact of some well applied initiatives. Pupils who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities are continuing to make satisfactory progress.

The school has refined its processes for assessing children's attainment on entry and now keeps good records. Attainment records now show clearly how children develop their skills across the main areas of learning through the Foundation Stage and in reading, writing and mathematics in Years 1 and 2.

Personal development and well-being

The school has maintained the positive picture noted at the time of the last visit. Pupils are polite and considerate of each other and co-operate well with teachers and other adults. Behaviour is good. Attendance continues to be satisfactory and there have been no permanent exclusions. Pupils have positive attitudes to school. They are keen to give reasons why they like school mentioning the French club and the dance club as features they particularly enjoy. Pupils understand about healthy eating and are aware of the need to respect safety rules. They openly discuss thoughts and feelings and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory. The newly formed school council is beginning to provide a channel through which pupils' views can be made and heard. Improvements in the development of pupils' basic skills are helping to ensure that they are reasonably well prepared for the next stage of their schooling and for their future economic well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning continue to be satisfactory with some good features. Aspects of provision have been strengthened further since the last visit, particularly in the reception classes and for writing. There are still some important weaknesses to address. These are primarily in lesson planning, to ensure that tasks are always well matched to pupils' needs, and in establishing clearly if lesson objectives are met. Provision for more able pupils has not been developed to any significant extent.

In the Foundation Stage, planning has improved, and better use is made of the accommodation, including the outdoor areas. Staff organise a good range of activities that interest young children. As a result, children's learning is satisfactory overall and they are developing well their skills of language and communication, and making gains in confidence and independence. Adults make sound use of assessment to ensure activities are matched to children's levels of understanding and they track children's progress carefully. Some opportunities are missed, however, to challenge the more able children.

Throughout the school, staff have good relationships with pupils, they encourage them in their work and they make effective use of resources to make learning interesting. They manage pupils' behaviour well and ensure that there is a positive ethos in classrooms. Lesson planning is undertaken conscientiously but there is some lack of clarity about how to make best use of the written planning document. There are inconsistencies in the effectiveness with which staff set work for pupils of different abilities, determine criteria for successful learning and in the ways in which they

explain these to pupils. Not all pupils, particularly the most able, are challenged to achieve their best.

As a result of intensive support for the teaching of writing provided by the local authority, staff are now much clearer about what level each pupil can be expected to achieve. Teachers set targets that are helping to ensure that the progress of each pupil stays on track. In a good literacy lesson seen in Year 2, the teacher used her understanding about what is required for pupils to gain the higher levels of the National Curriculum well to accelerate pupils' learning. Marking of writing is now effective in helping to inform pupils about the ways in which they might improve their work.

The curriculum for both the Foundation Stage and for Years 1 and 2 has improved and is now satisfactory. In the Foundation Stage, activities cover all six areas of learning and there is a good emphasis on independent, exploratory play. In Years 1 and 2, the development of pupils' writing is now more systematic and cross-curricular links are being used to support writing in different subjects, such as history. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) has improved now that many of the hardware problems have been resolved. Staff are gaining confidence in using the interactive whiteboards. Pupils' use of ICT, however, is still generally limited.

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

- strengthen the teaching to raise standards, particularly for more able pupils, in writing and in the reception class – satisfactory progress
- improve assessment and target-setting so that work is better matched to the needs and abilities of the pupils – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

Whilst improvements in leadership and management are visible and satisfactory, they are not sufficient for leadership and management to be judged as adequate overall. There is not yet a sense that the school is in a position to secure its own future unaided, able to generate its own impetus and be totally clear about future actions for improvement.

Good work has been undertaken by the headteacher and deputy on developing whole school systems for assessment, assisting teachers in applying them, and undertaking a more accurate self-evaluation of the school's effectiveness. There are still some concerns, however, about the

capacity of senior staff to ensure that all teachers feel confident in their planning of lessons and teaching, and are clear about exactly what is working well and what needs to be improved.

The extent to which the school's action plan for improvement has been enacted is variable. Work on improving pupils' standards in writing is having a positive impact and staff are ready to use the techniques acquired for raising further standards in reading and mathematics as well. The strands in the action plan dealing with assessment and the Foundation Stage have also progressed well. The school is looking forward to moving into the new Foundation Stage accommodation in early November. Work on improving provision for more able pupils is still at a very early stage. The extent to which all staff share a vision of how the school will look in the near future is less than might be expected at this stage. The school has valued and responded to much of the support provided by the local authority but is also feeling the need for a time for consolidation although knows it cannot slacken the pace of improvement, particularly in relation to lifting the overall quality of teaching and learning.

Governors have made a reasonable start in keeping under review the school's progress in moving out of a category of concern. Governors aim to work in pairs, one pair for each of the five main areas of the school's action plan; some pairs are working effectively, others less so. This work has been impeded, however, by the fact that the composition of the governing body has changed considerably over the last year and also because there are three vacancies. The work of defining clearly the indicators by which governors will judge the school's improvement has not been completed. Governors and senior managers have not ensured that caretaking arrangements have been made to cover fully the long term sickness of the present postholder. The lack of a caretaker is adding to the pressures on staff. Governors are not taking enough of a proactive part in ensuring that the senior staff steer the school's improvement. Minutes of full governing body meetings suggest that governors have not explored at sufficient depth the impact of the school's actions for improvement on outcomes for pupils. The headteacher's progress reports similarly focus more on actions than impact.

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

- Improve leadership and sharpen school improvement planning so that it focuses on raising attainment and the achievements of the pupils – satisfactory progress

External support

The local authority continues to provide satisfactory support and is seeking to strike a proper balance between directing specific actions for improvement and encouraging the school to determine these for itself. At present, the school is still very reliant on the local authority for advice. Much good advice has indeed been provided and responded to positively, particularly in relation to improving the Foundation Stage and for speeding up pupils' progress in writing. Good advice has been given for lesson planning but many staff are still not clear about what the school expects in terms of the written presentation of plans. Local authority evaluations of the school's progress are accurate. The school is about to embark on the Intensifying Support Programme (ISP) run by the local authority.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures– satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection - satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed

Priorities for further improvement

No additional priorities have been given following this second monitoring visit.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Chief Improvement Adviser for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
H M Inspector