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9 November 2006

Mrs J Lee
Acting Headteacher
Birtley East Community Primary School
Highfield
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Chester le Street
County Durham
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Dear Mrs Lee,

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BIRTLEY EAST COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Maggi Shepherd Additional Inspector, to your school on 7 November 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 September 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 chair of governors, members of the senior management team, and representatives from the local authority.

Context

The substantive headteacher is currently on maternity leave until February 2007. An acting headteacher, Mrs June Lee, took up post at the beginning of the autumn term.

The headteacher planned, and the acting headteacher has overseen, a radical re-organisation in staffing within the school. Most of the teaching staff are now in different classes to the ones in which they taught at the last visit, and there are some new members of staff. The role of the school's managers has been strengthened, with the establishment of coordinators in each of the key phases. From the beginning of the autumn term, there have been a number of unavoidable staffing difficulties in Year 5 and Year 6. A small number of supply teachers have provided temporary cover during this time. Although the school has tried hard to minimise any disruption, pupils have inevitably experienced an unsettled time, and some school developments have suffered. The situation is now resolved in Year 6 with the return of the class teacher, and the school is currently in the process of appointing a longer term temporary teacher for Year 5.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in lessons has improved overall since the previous inspection. However, it is not consistent through the school. In some classes pupils have had several different teachers during the term, which has resulted in a lack of continuity in their learning and reduced the rate of progress over time. In the increasing proportion of classes where teaching is good, pupils make good progress due to the higher expectations of these teachers. Although there has been some disruption to the quantity and quality of work produced by pupils in the oldest two classes, this is now improving. Across the school, scrutiny of work generally demonstrates a good breadth of subjects covered, with tasks which clearly increase in difficulty to build up pupils' expertise. Pupils' achievement in most subjects is appropriate for their age, but this is let down by their weaker mathematical skills and particularly their literacy skills.

The achievement of the more able pupils remains inadequate. Pupils comment that their work is too easy. Work in lessons is not challenging enough and teachers do not target these pupils effectively enough to ensure that they reach higher standards. The progress of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved overall since the previous inspection but remains inconsistent in different year groups. The improved systems put into place by the new special educational needs co-ordinator are ensuring that the progress of pupils in their withdrawal sessions matches their needs across the curriculum.

The 2006 national tests in Year 6 show that standards have risen in mathematics and are now above average. The outcomes of the SATs tests show an improvement overall in English since last year, but there is a considerable difference between standards in reading and writing, with a very small proportion of pupils reaching the higher levels in writing. There is a similar picture in the 2006 Year 2 national tests. Standards rose in mathematics and are now close to the national average. There is a clear gap between the average standards in reading and the below average standards in writing.

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

- improving standards in learning throughout the school – satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour continues to be generally good. In particular, their attitudes to learning have improved. They are enthusiastic about new developments designed to encourage more participation in the lesson, such as 'picking pots', and overall they are far more involved in the lessons than at the previous visit. However, the behaviour of some older pupils has deteriorated as a result of the variations in staffing and routine they have experienced this term. Staff in these classes are working hard to restore consistently high expectations, and this is now beginning to have a good effect. The school continues to work hard to encourage good attendance.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved since the last visit. There are more examples of good teaching and these are more consistent across the school. Teachers are using a wider range of strategies and activities, and lessons are more interesting, engaging and enjoyable for the pupils. There were a number of examples of lessons which were imaginative and dynamic as well as being well planned, structured, and paced. These lessons created a shared enthusiasm for learning and were a pleasure to watch.

Thirteen lessons were observed, of which two were inadequate, four were satisfactory, six were good and one was outstanding. Good teaching was characterised by good planning soundly based on up-to-date knowledge of pupils' relevant skills, good pace, and interesting, varied activities which built up into a coherent whole. Where lessons were less good, this was largely because of a lack of focus and pace.

There were two specific teaching points common to many lessons, both good and less good. In nearly all lessons there were too many success criteria, which reduced the pupils' understanding of the purpose of the lesson. Similarly, in many lessons, teachers tended not to pick up on verbal contributions made by higher ability pupils. This reduced the enthusiasm and progress of these particular pupils, and also prevented the less able pupils from benefiting from these contributions.

Staff have worked hard to introduce a number of developments, such as the 'feedback for learning' policy, and to tackle areas of weakness such as the plenary sessions that conclude lessons. The quality of these sessions is now at least satisfactory with some elements of good and very good practice. Assessment has improved considerably, particularly with regard to the regularity and consistency of

marking. However, there are instances where pupils' mistakes are noted but there is insufficient opportunity for suitable correction, practice and subsequent success. The new feedback for learning policy is good, and is beginning to be used well, and in some cases very well.

However, many of the new developments are still in their early stages and, while they are promising and have already had a beneficial effect, they are not yet fully established. A particular concern now is that, while teachers are rightly developing more sophisticated teaching skills, many pupils still have basic literacy and numeracy skills that are not as good as they should be for their age. This can result in situations where teachers are providing interesting and appropriately demanding activities, which pupils cannot fully understand because, for example, they cannot read the worksheets they are to use. This gap between the pupils' basic skills and the high level of teaching in different subjects they need and are now beginning to receive is a major problem. Currently, even good teachers are not aware enough of this. For example, even in some good lessons, the teacher's assessment of prior learning was clear and accurate, but only with regard to the specific areas to be taught. There was little if any account taken of pupils' level of basic literacy and numeracy.

The use of assessment to inform planning has improved, but there are still instances of teachers basing their lesson on what they believe pupils to have been taught, rather than what pupils actually learned. Provision for pupils who have special educational needs has considerably improved, with an updated and more effective register, and careful planning for specialist intervention in areas of identified need. However, this is not always supported by activities in class which are well matched to these pupils' needs. The higher ability pupils are still not being stretched enough, and this remains a concern.

Leadership and management

The school's leadership and management continue to improve. This is a considerable achievement, given the unexpected and unavoidable staffing problems in Key Stage 2, the planned absence of the headteacher, and the difficulties noted at the last visit in appointing a new chair of the governing body.

Despite these difficulties, the school has continued to implement a number of key initiatives identified in the school improvement plan, and to focus promptly and effectively on on-going areas for development which arise from, for example, monitoring by the acting headteacher and senior team. Senior staff have a good knowledge of the school's progress and have a realistic but suitably determined approach to managing the overall improvement issues in the face of particular challenges such as staffing disruption. They have maintained a good grasp of the improvement timescale through regular monitoring of the improvement plan. A particular strength which has developed since the last visit is the establishment of the phase coordinators' team, which has already undertaken a considerable amount of important work in monitoring and strategic planning. In addition, a newly

appointed and highly effective special educational needs coordinator has reviewed and improved the systems for managing this area of the school, and established the ground work for developing good practice.

The acting headteacher has brought a number of high-level teaching and management skills to the school. She has quickly grasped the key improvement areas to focus on and provided effective management across all aspects of the school. As a result of her careful judgement and the increasing capacity of staff to own and manage the improvement process, the pace and direction of improvement have been maintained. The acting headteacher has also added value to some planned improvements through her particular strengths in supporting the development of teaching skills.

A new chair of the governing body has recently been appointed. She has a good grasp of the key development areas, is committed to supporting the staff and pupils, and has the relevant skills and experience to enable her to fulfil her role successfully. The school continues to manage its finances appropriately. There are longer term plans for bringing the Nursery classroom over to the main school building, and appropriate initial costings for these are in hand.

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

- improving the most senior leadership and management in the school – good progress
- improving the school's self-evaluation procedures and act on findings to set priorities – good progress
- improving school improvement planning – good progress
- improving financial management – good progress

External support

The local authority has continued to provide good support in terms of monitoring and advice on improving the quality of teaching, and consultation on a wide range of general management issues. It has provided a good level of additional support to ensure that this interim period is managed successfully. It has worked hard and with success to ensure the appointment of a suitably qualified and experienced chair of governors.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Priorities for further improvement

- To develop pupils' basic literacy and numeracy skills
- To raise the achievement of higher ability pupils through a greater level of challenge in lessons
- To raise the achievement of lower ability and special educational needs pupils particularly in whole-class lessons

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

Yours sincerely

Andrea Lyons
H M Inspector