



19 October 2006

The Headteacher
Mr H Kennedy
Black Horse Hill Junior School
Saughall Massie Road
West Kirby
Wirral
Merseyside
CH48 6DR

Dear Mr Kennedy

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BLACK HORSE HILL JUNIOR SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Jean Kendall HMI and Denise Shields, Additional Inspector, to your school on 17 and 18 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 November 2006.

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 headteacher, the chair of governors, the coordinator for special educational needs, representatives of the local authority (LA), groups of pupils and nominated staff.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit two teachers have left the school and have not been replaced. The number of pupils on roll has declined. Consequently, the number of classes has been reduced from eight to seven. Pupils in Years 4 and 5 are now taught in three mixed-aged classes.

Achievement and standards

The results of the 2006 national assessment tests for Year 6 pupils showed improvement in two of the three core subjects. In mathematics, the proportion of pupils attaining the expected level for their age group increased

from the 2005 figure by 9% and rose to 86%. The proportion of those attaining the higher Level 5 also rose by the same degree to 43%. Similar improvements were made in science where 95% of pupils achieved the expected Level 4. The more able pupils performed markedly better in science in the 2006 assessments than in the 2005 tests. Results, however, in English declined slightly at both Level 4 and Level 5. The school narrowly missed meeting most of its challenging targets.

Overall, pupils made satisfactory progress in lessons observed during the visit. Some made good progress. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities also made satisfactory progress. Work was more appropriately matched to the abilities of pupils, particularly the more able, than was the case at the time of the last visit.

The school's system for the tracking of pupils' progress in English, mathematics and science is now much more accurate. It is regularly updated and shared with teachers. Assessment information has been used to set individual targets for all pupils to achieve by the end of the year in English, mathematics and science. Results for separate year groups are also tracked and analysed more carefully. Targets for the end of the academic year have been set for each year group. These new tracking systems have already enabled the school to identify and respond to underachievement at a much earlier stage than was the case in the past.

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

- Keep a careful and more accurate track of pupils' progress so that more precise targets can be set for each year group –satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

Throughout the school relationships between pupils are good. They are polite and friendly and keen to talk to and help visitors. Pupils make good progress in their personal development and have a firm understanding of the need for healthy lifestyles and how to keep safe. They behave well and are cooperative and articulate in class. They confidently answer their teachers' questions and express their views. The oldest pupils offer suggestions with assurance. Pupils say they enjoy most of their lessons and generally find the work interesting. Sometimes they do not remain focused on the task in hand and noise levels rise. Teachers do not always deal firmly enough with this and as a result the pace of learning slows. When teachers' presentations are too lengthy pupils generally remain attentive, but on occasion a small minority become restless and lose interest in the lesson.

Quality of Provision

Teaching and learning are satisfactory and occasionally good. No inadequate teaching was observed, which represents an improvement since the previous visit.

Teachers have good subject knowledge. Several use the interactive whiteboard effectively to involve pupils in the lesson and to demonstrate key teaching points. In the best examples, this has a positive effect on pupils' motivation and learning. Explanations of what pupils have to do and what they will learn are clear. However, the introduction to lessons is often too lengthy and as a result pupils become restless.

Lessons are well planned and in most instances there is a varied range of activities. Teachers have adopted useful new strategies to improve learning, such as the 'learning walls'. Sometimes the ends of lessons are used well to check pupils' understanding, and good reference is made to current targets. Additionally, some teachers use this time well to extend pupils' knowledge and skills further by good use of questioning. This is not the case in all classes.

Teachers have worked hard to plan work that is more closely matched to pupils' abilities. The potential to improve the progress made by pupils through grouping by ability is now being more effectively exploited. The work which is set, especially for the more capable pupils, is no longer mundane, but there is scope to challenge and extend their skills and knowledge still further. The less able pupils, and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are well included in lessons and generally well supported. Sometimes, teaching assistants do too much for these groups; as a consequence, opportunities are missed to encourage independence and self-confidence.

Whilst the pace of some lessons was lively, others remain pedestrian. In these instances the pace of learning is not as brisk as it could be. Currently, teaching is not consistently strong enough throughout the school to ensure that all pupils reach their full potential.

Teachers have continued to adopt and familiarise themselves with assessment methods so they have a clearer understanding of the levels pupils are expected to achieve at the end of each year and by the end of the key stage. But other than in writing there are as yet no levelled portfolios of work in other subjects, which can show teachers the levels pupils can aspire to.

The school now has a good range of assessment systems that enable pupils' progress to be regularly tracked and reviewed. These provide an accurate

picture of how well pupils are doing. This information helps teachers to group pupils more effectively within classes and ability groups, and to plan work to meet their differing needs. There is scope to extend current tracking arrangements so that it is possible to compare the progress made by differing groups, for example those entitled to free school meals and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. As several of these systems are relatively new, their full impact cannot yet be assessed.

Since the previous monitoring visit, opportunities for pupils to learn and apply problem-solving strategies in mathematics have increased. Teachers' understanding of this area has been developed through training and consequently the teaching of specific strategies has improved. Opportunities for pupils to apply mathematical knowledge in science, design and technology and physical education have been further developed. This has helped pupils to reinforce and practise their skills. However, opportunities to apply generic problem-solving skills, for example through investigative activities, are not yet embedded in other subjects.

Curriculum provision is better matched to the learning needs of pupils than it was at the time of the inspection in November 2005. The school has extended its arrangements for teaching pupils in ability groups, so that most are now also taught in ability groups for science. Literacy and numeracy are taught through extended lessons. In some of these lessons time is not well used.

Marking is good in literacy. Teachers' comments offer pupils appropriate guidance on how they can improve their work. Marking in other subjects is less consistent and much of it is of a congratulatory nature. The school has identified this as an area for development.

Pupils' expectations of what they can achieve have been raised. Most are generally aware of the National Curriculum levels they have achieved and what level their age group should be aiming at. However, individual pupils are not yet given information on the specific levels they are currently working at or those to which they should work towards by the end of the year. Some pupils are shown examples of good work to inspire them. However, there are few displays around the school of exemplary levelled work to which pupils can aspire. A weekly 'traffic light' system in classes for older pupils enables them to assess how well they have made progress in numeracy and literacy work. Pupils spoke highly of this system as it enabled teachers to further explain aspects of learning to them which they had not fully grasped. An information meeting has been held to explain this system for parents.

Teachers' expectations of pupils' progress have risen. Regular assessments and up-to-date tracking data have provided teachers with a clearer view of

the levels of achievement pupils can be expected to attain. Staff are aware of the end of year targets which have been set for pupils and year groups, and of which pupils have underperformed.

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

- Improving the teachers' expertise in the use of assessment so that all have a clear idea of the levels that pupils attain –satisfactory progress.
- Using the information from assessments to plan work which is more exactly matched to pupils' learning needs – satisfactory progress.
- Increasing pupils' opportunities to apply their mathematical skills to solve problems – satisfactory progress.
- Raising pupils' and teachers' expectations of pupils' progress – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has provided clear direction for the continued improvement of the school. Inadequate teaching has been tackled effectively. Links with the local infant school, particularly in relation to the sharing of prior assessment information, have been strengthened. There is greater strategic use of assessment information. For example, resources were carefully redeployed to tackle underachievement which the new assessment systems identified. Targets for the statutory performance management of teachers are usefully focused on raising the achievement of specific groups of underachieving pupils. New initiatives to raise performance have been introduced, such as the extension of teaching pupils in ability groups and the Intensifying Support Programme (ISP). The impact of earlier initiatives, such as the lengthening of numeracy and literacy lessons, has yet to be fully evaluated.

The senior leadership team supports the headteacher well. It monitors planning and the work of pupils regularly and gives useful feedback to teachers. Recently, interviews have been conducted with some pupils to ascertain how far they understand their work. The assessment manager has worked hard to develop and coordinate the new assessment and tracking systems. Under the guidance of subject managers, teachers have analysed the most recent assessments of pupils' performance in English, mathematics and science.

Appropriate progress has been made in developing the school's own systems for the monitoring of teaching and learning, which previously was led by the LA. This is at present led by the headteacher. Other members of the senior leadership team are not yet involved in this aspect of school life. Comments

in the recent evaluations of literacy lessons on issues affecting pupils' progress are in line with inspection findings.

The headteacher's evaluation of the school's performance is broadly accurate. It highlights the need to continue to improve provision for pupils, particularly the more able. Good quality plans exist for raising attainment in English and mathematics as part of the ISP. The headteacher has a clear view of the priorities for the school's further improvement but these are not yet formally articulated in a current school improvement plan. The previous school improvement plan has yet to be evaluated. The school has plans to redress this issue.

Governors remain very supportive of the headteacher and are providing more challenge on key questions about standards and the progress pupils make. They have a sound understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Governors are fully involved in the setting of challenging targets but are less involved in monitoring the school's improvement planning.

External support

The LA continues to provide strong support for the school. Two general inspectors visit the school regularly and discuss improvement issues. One is leading the school's training in the ISP, which is funded by the LA. The school has good links with two local secondary schools, and is currently developing links with a third.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory progress.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory progress.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of good teaching.
- Ensure that all actions leading to school improvement receive the appropriate level of attention, including the further development of rigorous and robust internal systems for the monitoring of teaching and learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council.

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
H M Inspector