

28 November 2006

Mr Stringer
Acting Headteacher
Eckington Junior School
School Street
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Derbyshire
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Dear Mr Stringer

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ECKINGTON JUNIOR SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Lynne Blakelock, Additional Inspector, to your school on 15-16 November, 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.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of the senior leadership team, chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The acting deputy headteacher left at the end of the summer term and a new deputy headteacher took up post in September. The headteacher was absent due to illness from the beginning of November and was not present during the monitoring inspection. A seconded acting headteacher joined the school two days before this inspection.

Achievement and standards

There are signs of improvement in the progress children make in English. For example, although still below the national average, the proportion of children attaining the higher Level 5 in the 2006 national tests rose. Standards in writing have also marginally improved. The progress children make in writing, especially in Years 5 and 6 is helping children to move towards the standards that they should reach. This improving picture is confirmed in the quality of children's work and the progress seen in lessons. Nevertheless, at the end of Year 6, standards in national tests remain well below average in English. The overall progress that pupils make in this subject continues to be inadequate. In reading, standards slipped a little but not significantly.

The national tests in 2006 also showed that mathematics standards overall remain just below average. Having said this, the proportion attaining the higher Level 5 matches the national average. Standards in science have improved and are just above average.

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

- Raise standards in English and particularly in writing - satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well being

Pupils are regaining their sense of security in school because of the more stable staffing situation. They see recent changes in school as positive and appreciate the opportunities each day to learn new things. They are disappointed that the school council has still not been re-launched and that very few opportunities exist for them to take responsibility in school.

Pupils behave sensibly round the school. Behaviour remains good in lessons although there is inattention and loss of focus when there is too much direction from the teacher and when the work set does not match closely enough their learning needs. Pupils thrive in lessons where they can learn for themselves and when they can apply their learning to problem solving.

Quality of provision

Although the quality of teaching continues to vary it is evident that good teaching is becoming more prevalent. This is an improvement from when the school was inspected in September 2005. During the inspection most of the teaching seen in Years 5 and 6 was good and some aspects of teaching were

outstanding. Teaching was carefully planned and the work given to children was effectively matched to children's different abilities. Teaching skilfully reacted to how well children were learning by adapting questions accordingly and ensuring that high expectations dictated the pace of the lesson. Behaviour in these classrooms was good, and at times very good, because children enjoyed their learning. In these year groups teaching was helping children to catch up to where they should be in their learning.

Since the last visit, teaching in Year 4 has improved, mainly due to more stability in staffing. However, the quality of provision in Years 3 and 4 is not as strong as in other classes. Teaching in these year groups was less effective and consequently the progress children made was patchy because teaching did not always respond well enough to children's learning needs. For example one lesson seen was inadequate because teaching was dull, work was not well matched to children's different abilities and they made inadequate progress.

Systems put in place for assessing children's progress continue to be developed. Children's targets in English are regularly reviewed and are pertinent to helping children make progress in their writing. In mathematics there has been a greater focus on using test data to inform target setting and this has led to reasonably focused targets being set for a year group or for a particular ability set in Year 5 and 6. Beyond target setting the use of assessment was effectively used in most lessons to ensure teaching built on what children had already successfully achieved. However, in teaching that was less effective, the use of assessment was a weakness and the work given to children was not pitched at the right level. The quality of marking as an assessment tool varies. There is good evidence that analytical marking of writing, for example in Year 6, is clearly identifying what children have done well and what they need to do next to improve.

The use of teaching assistants has improved since the last visit. For example in one lesson a teaching assistant effectively supported children with learning difficulties and in another a teaching assistant used excellent questioning to draw out a child's understanding of the task they had been given.

The changes made to the organisation of lessons in the morning have improved the rigour of timekeeping. There is still room for improvement though as spelling work planned for the last 15 minutes of the morning did not take place in some year groups, diluting the impact required across the school.

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

- Continue to improve assessment and the checking on pupils' progress – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

At the time of the last visit the effectiveness of the senior leadership team (SLT) was improving due to the headteacher's delegating of responsibilities to the co-ordinators for literacy and numeracy. Following that visit, the headteacher has failed to maintain this level of delegation, which has slowed the pace of improvements and significantly restricted the development of the leadership skills of the SLT. Furthermore, even though the school recognised the need to quickly utilise the new deputy headteacher's skills, she has not been given opportunities to monitor teaching or children's work. In addition, her first few weeks have been interrupted by a short period when she was absent due to ill health and two weeks as acting headteacher. The SLT has lost the momentum that it had and has not provided the drive and direction that the school needs.

During October the headteacher monitored teaching. Notes made of those lesson observations are brief and do not suggest that robust judgements were made or that sufficient challenge was given as points for development. The only other monitoring that has taken place is by the literacy co-ordinator who has monitored teachers' planning and parts of lessons. This has been as a result of her own initiative and she has made satisfactory progress in leading and managing this subject.

Under the overriding leadership and management of the headteacher the SLT has failed to make adequate progress in a number of other areas. It has not updated the school's plans for improvement, completed any analysis of national test results in mathematics and science or devised a timetable for further monitoring. Although a target in an improvement plan, the school has not completed the self evaluation form which is a commonly used document that asks schools to make judgements about the quality of provision nor has it undertaken any alternative activity. Leadership of literacy and numeracy has improved since the inspection in September 2005 but little has been done to extend these improvements to other subject areas. The school has therefore missed opportunities to improve leadership and management skills that are generic to many areas. The school currently has no science co-ordinator and has no clear plan as how to remedy this situation.

The deputy headteacher has made every effort to lead and manage what is a difficult situation. She has successfully tackled the lull in work on assessment and is on course to accelerate improvement. Her teaching commitments have meant that her impact on the whole school has been limited. At the time of the inspection the new acting headteacher had been in post for two days. In that short time he had identified some key actions that could move the school on. He had also very successfully taught the children a new song which they sung in an assembly during the inspection. This was the first time a song had been sung in an assembly during the three monitoring inspection visits and demonstrated a spirited determination to make a difference immediately.

The work of the governors has been frustrated by aspects of poor leadership from the SLT. The chair of governors continues to be appropriately robust in her actions and directs her own leadership skills to areas where it is most needed and is most effective. Important work has started on monitoring the school's work and this is beginning to help the Governors build up a picture of the schools performance. The governors are fully aware of the issues surrounding leadership and management and know that this is a priority to get right.

The newly formed SLT has not had sufficient time to prove that it can to return to the steady progress that was being made in the early summer.

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

- Instigate a programme of monitoring, evaluation and support in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning and improve the systems the school has to check on its own effectiveness – inadequate progress.
- Develop the leadership skills of subject leaders and strengthen those of the senior leadership team – inadequate progress.
- Improve governance, particularly the way governors hold the school to account for its standards and their involvement in planning improvement – satisfactory progress.

External support

The impact of the work of the LA varies and some is ineffective. There has been some success in advisory staff supporting the literacy and numeracy coordinators improving leadership and management in these areas. Advisory staff have also worked along side teachers being instrumental in improving teaching. However, the LA has not challenged the SLT sufficiently to bring about enough improvement; targets identified in the LA's plan of action have not been met. For example, an agreed meeting to complete the school's self-evaluation form did not take place and the school has not started this task. Since the last visit the LA's link adviser has monitored two lessons with the headteacher and offered useful quality assurance. However, the lessons observed were in year groups where there is stronger teaching and so opportunities were missed to judge how effectively weaker teaching is being tackled.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the effectiveness of the senior leadership team, especially focusing on:
 - setting up a timetable of monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning involving all members of the SLT
 - tackling the issues that result in weaker teaching and undertaking further monitoring and evaluation to measure any improvements
 - undertaking a thorough evaluation of the school's work so that clear judgements are made and shared with governors
 - updating action plans to reflect the findings of the evaluation.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Strategic Director for Derbyshire.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Cook
H M Inspector