

Tribal Group
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR
T 0845 123 6001
F 0845 123 6002

Ofsted helpline
08456 404045
edhelpline@ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Andrew Morrish
The Headteacher
Victoria Park Primary School
Ballot Street
Smethwick
West Midlands B66 3HH

Dear Mr Morrish

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF VICTORIA PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Paula Heaney HMI and Paul Mulligan and Joanna Pike, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 1 and 2 November 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 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 headteacher, the deputy headteachers, the phase leaders, the leaders of English, mathematics and science, the learning mentors, a group of pupils, the chair of the governing body and the local authority (LA) adviser.

Context

Since becoming subject to special measures the school has had an exceptionally turbulent period of leadership. Three consultant heads have been seconded to the school during the last year. Serious leadership issues connected with the second consultant headteacher arose in the half term following the first monitoring visit which greatly undermined the school's already fragile state and halted much of the progress which it had begun to make.

A new substantive headteacher took up post at the start of this term. The former acting headteacher has resumed her substantive post as deputy headteacher. A second deputy headteacher has also been appointed: at the time of the previous monitoring inspection she was seconded to Victoria Park as an acting deputy headteacher. Three new teachers took up post at the start of this term.

Achievement and standards

Key Stage 2 results in the end of key stage tests in 2006 were broadly similar to 2005, although a few more pupils gained the higher Level 5. These results represent standards which are very low in comparison with provisional national figures, and pupils made poor progress from the end of Key Stage 1. Results for 2006 for Key Stage 1 also show no overall improvement from 2005. Standards at Key Stage 1 remain very low. The school's assessment information shows clearly that too many pupils in each year group did not make enough progress during the last year. In lessons standards are low and progress is too variable. Pupils are well motivated and, where the task is well matched to their needs and the learning outcomes are clear, they make satisfactory and sometimes good progress. However, in too many lessons it is not clear enough what the pupils are expected to learn, expectations are too low, and the pace is too slow, which leads to pupils making inadequate progress.

Systems for collating and analysing assessment information have been well developed and are sophisticated enough when fully in use to be able to give a very good level of detail about the progress which each pupil is making. Aspirational targets have been set for year groups and for individual pupils. However, the leadership team have correctly identified that some of the teachers' assessments of pupils' current levels of attainment are inaccurate. Assessments are therefore being repeated and this has caused delays in implementing the new tracking systems. Robust processes are being developed for ensuring that teachers know the levels that pupils are working at and that they are held to account for pupils' progress but this has not yet had an impact on raising standards and tackling underachievement.

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

Throughout the school pupils are well behaved and well mannered. They tried hard in lessons and were keen to participate and to answer questions.

When working in groups they cooperated well and enjoyed helping each other. In some lessons teaching did not sustain the pupils' interest and a minority found it difficult to stay on task, although the pupils made a good effort to do so.

Pupils enjoy being at school and are positive about their friendships and the way they are supported by staff. The good behaviour seen in the previous visit has been maintained inside and beyond the classroom. During the summer term, staff and pupils were confused by the way in which the consultant headteacher was applying the behaviour policy. This was further exacerbated by an overly negative and critical report about behaviour from the LA. Pupils have nevertheless retained their understanding of what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and report that incidents of bullying are rare. The expectation for good behaviour is well reinforced through the school's behaviour management system. This has been recently revisited, resulting in a more consistent and organised approach that is fully understood by the pupils and staff.

Learning mentors make a significant contribution to the well-being of the pupils. They are enthusiastic about their role and are successful in working with children who are experiencing behavioural and social difficulties. Pupils who receive support report that they are much happier in school and look forward to mentoring sessions. The school continues to promote healthy lifestyles and received the bronze Healthy Schools Award at the end of last term.

Attendance has improved since the previous visit and is in line with the national average. There are effective systems in place to monitor attendance. Parents are invited into the school to discuss attendance that is below target and they have become more aware of the impact absence has on their child's learning.

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

The quality of teaching observed on this visit was inadequate overall although almost every lesson had elements of good teaching present. Observations by senior managers and the LA echo this finding. However, a series of observations which were conducted during the summer term by a consultant headteacher did not match the judgements made either by HMI or by the substantive senior leaders. This therefore gave contradictory messages to teachers about the quality of their teaching which halted the fragile progress that had been made in improving teaching. This term, training and clear

expectations are contributing to a better shared understanding of what constitutes satisfactory and good teaching.

Consistent strengths seen in lessons were teachers trying to make pupils aware of what they would learn, and giving time at the end of lessons to let pupils reflect on what they had learnt. This was particularly effective when pupils had to explain or write down what they had learnt and what activities they found hard. However, although planning was very thorough in noting what pupils would do, it rarely identified a clear learning objective for the lesson or the small learning steps involved in reaching it. As a consequence, teachers and pupils tended to focus on the completion of tasks rather than on learning. Teachers have more accurate measurements of pupils' progress and some are beginning to make better use of them in planning lessons so that tasks match pupils' needs more closely. Nevertheless, this is still an area of weakness in many classes.

In several lessons teachers tended to talk too much and this limited pupils' chances to explain ideas. Pupils were seldom given enough opportunities to be independent. Pupils often enjoyed their learning but became restless when activities were dull or were not well matched to their needs. Learning support practitioners were not always used effectively to support identified groups of pupils within a lesson, and this resulted in these pupils making little or no progress because they had no support from an adult. Marking is still patchy and often does not help pupils know how well they are doing. Pupils are generally not aware of their targets or what they have to do to improve.

In the strongest lessons teachers had high expectations and broke learning down into manageable steps. What pupils were going to learn was made clear at the start of the lesson. Pupils enjoyed being challenged by the teacher and being kept working at a smart pace. They benefited from the opportunities to work together and to talk about their learning.

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 consistently high quality teaching across the school – inadequate.

Leadership and management

The deputy headteachers maintained the school's stability during the severely disrupted second half of the summer term. They managed staff's uncertainty sensitively and ensured that the school ran smoothly on a day to day basis. Crucially, given the number of consultant leaders the school has had, the new headteacher has set a clear and suitably aspirational direction for the school's improvement. He has made it appropriately plain to staff that the school's progress needs to be swift, but has also given them ample encouragement. His positive leadership, coupled with good support from the deputy

headteachers, has helped to raise staff morale and to begin to accelerate progress after so little was made during the summer term. Staff and the senior team have welcomed the improved communication systems which the headteacher has introduced, such as the daily staff and leadership team briefings. Initial observations carried out by the headteacher and the deputy headteachers are thorough and have given a reasonable baseline for initial action. The headteacher is aware of the urgent need to put in place a suitable programme of challenge and support for those teachers whose teaching is unsatisfactory, but this work has not yet begun.

The English, science and mathematics coordinators have welcomed the improved guidance they have been given about how to monitor and evaluate, and have begun to use this well to develop suitable systems to assess the quality of teachers' planning. Importantly, the headteacher has given staff the opportunity to meet regularly in year teams in order to plan together and to discuss pupils' progress. Some teachers have begun to understand the extent to which they are responsible for the pupils' progress and the actions which they need to take to ensure that this is at least satisfactory. This understanding is still not sufficiently widespread to make a significant difference to the way that all teachers plan and teach their lessons. Nevertheless, many teachers are motivated and want to improve their practice. The actions taken by the new headteacher and the two deputy headteachers this term have begun to demonstrate a greater capacity to improve than has previously been evident in the school.

The chair of the governing body is committed to the school and continues to expend considerable time on his role. He is suitably ambitious for the school and has a good understanding of the urgency with which the school needs to improve. Although supportive, the governors' understanding of their role has not increased since the previous monitoring inspection and further training is needed to enable the governors to provide the school with suitable challenge as well as support.

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 – inadequate.

External support

The school improvement adviser has continued to be very supportive of the school and has helped the headteacher to decide on his priorities. Good support has been provided by two advanced skills teachers who have given the school accurate information and helpful advice, particularly in the Foundation Stage. However, having a series of consultant headteachers since

being subject to special measures has led to the school being given conflicting messages about crucial aspects of its work, particularly teaching and learning and pupils' behaviour. A review of behaviour was carried out by the behaviour support team on the day following the previous monitoring inspection. The resulting report paints a negative picture of behaviour in the school and does not reflect either HMI's judgements or the school's own evaluation. Moreover, the review led to little follow up or support for the school. The minutes of the task group meetings give no evidence that the LA is being sufficiently rigorous in evaluating the impact of its own actions or strategically planning the support and challenge it gives to the school. Furthermore, there is no clear record of what further action is to be taken as a result of each part of the discussion, who is to take it, or what is the focus of the next meeting.

The consultant for the Intensifying Support Programme (ISP) in consultation with one of the deputy headteachers has planned a suitable initial programme of support for the school which is about to begin.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop teachers' understanding of learning objectives so that in all lessons pupils are given clear information about what they will learn rather than what they will do.
- Accurately identify each teacher's strengths and weaknesses and plan and implement a programme of challenge and support to promote rapid improvement.
- Secure appropriate training for the governing body to allow them to challenge and to support the school more effectively.

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

Sue Morris-King
H M Inspector