



7 March 2007

Mrs Rickeard
Headteacher
Birtley East Community Primary School
Highfield
Birtley
Chester le Street
County Durham
DH3 1QQ

Dear Mrs Rickeard,

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BIRTLEY EAST COMMUNITY PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Dave Byrne, Additional Inspector, to your school on 5 March 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth 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 headteacher, members of the senior management team, the chair of governors, and representatives from the local authority.

Context

The headteacher has recently returned to school from maternity leave. She and the acting headteacher worked effectively together to ensure a smooth transition which prevented any disruption to the improvement process. The

acting headteacher has ensured that planned developments were implemented well and on time.

Key Stage 1 staffing remains stable, but Key Stage 2 has again experienced unavoidable problems through the absence of a teacher because of ill health. This has necessitated the redeployment of the phase co-ordinator to Year 6, while Year 3 is being taught by a temporary supply teacher. A new class teacher has been appointed to Year 5. The headteacher is temporarily taking on the role of literacy co-ordinator. This is inevitably having some detrimental effects on the quality and consistency of both teaching and wider school developments, and this is a concern. However, the headteacher is working very effectively to minimise the disruption, plan for stability and gain positive outcomes from the situation wherever possible, for instance by planning to stream some literacy groups to provide greater consistency for pupils.

Achievement and standards

Achievement improved in 2006 although the targets for Year 6 were not reached. Standards at Year 6 were higher than in 2005 and represented significant improvement on 2004. Attainment was particularly strong in mathematics, being just above the national average, whilst results in science were close to the national average. There has been a steady rise over the last three years in the proportion of pupils gaining the target Level 4 in mathematics and science. In English progress is much more variable, and standards are below average. Overall, girls tend to do better than boys.

Taken over the longer term, the rate of progress across the school is improving. However, analysis of pupils' work shows that while they progress at a good rate in Key Stage 1, their progress in Key Stage 2 varies from class to class and is satisfactory overall.

Effective systems have been introduced to assess and track pupils' progress so that underachievement is identified. Very successful strategies have been introduced to support the lowest attaining pupils. These strategies are having considerable success in raising standards in reading and are starting to improve pupils' writing and mathematics. The more able pupils are still not making the progress of which they are capable.

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

- improving standards in learning throughout the school – good progress

Personal development and well-being

Pupils are usually well behaved and conduct themselves with maturity and consideration for others. In lessons, most are keen to listen and do their best, although there are a small number of pupils, mostly boys in Years 5 and 6, who are often reluctant to work. Pupils are proud of being school councillors and willingly take responsibility for their learning and meet expectations for helping out with variety of jobs around school. These opportunities for pupils to participate in the running of the school have been introduced comparatively recently, but have proven to be very popular with pupils; they are having a beneficial effect on their social and behavioural development.

The current rate of attendance of 93.9 per cent is close to the national average. The pupils take pride in receiving their acclaim as being star pupils and enjoy the warm applause from their classmates.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has generally continued to improve since the last monitoring inspection. Teachers consistently plan a range of suitable activities to match pupils' different levels of need, including extension activities for higher ability pupils. The quality of marking has improved greatly, and teachers' expectations of pupils have risen.

There is excellent specialist teaching and support for groups of lower ability pupils and pupils who have learning difficulties and disabilities. This teaching is securely based on recent individual assessments and is well planned to ensure that gaps and delays in pupils' basic skills are tackled systematically. Lessons are detailed and thorough, and pupils enjoy the purposeful atmosphere and range of activities provided. They make good and often outstanding progress. A number of pupils have made such good progress that it is no longer considered necessary for them to be entered on the school's register for special educational needs. Many have improved their reading ages by over a year in the three months they have been receiving this additional input. The dramatic and continuing improvement in pupils' basic skills is extremely important, both for the individual pupils, and because it supports the development of more interesting and sophisticated approaches to teaching and learning throughout the school.

However, the unavoidable difficulties the school has experienced with staffing have resulted in a loss of continuity and consistency in teaching in Key Stage 2. Although teaching across the school is at least satisfactory, sometimes good and in some cases outstanding, a number of otherwise positive

developments are not yet fully established and effective. For example, although assessment practice is much more consistent in approach throughout the school, there are still insufficient opportunities for pupils to correct and extend their work as a result of teachers' comments.

Teachers' planning continues to improve, and is now good. It is consistently based on assessment of pupils' previous learning, and provides a range of activities designed to meet the needs of pupils of different abilities. This includes activities for higher ability pupils, which is a positive development. However, the activities are not always challenging enough to extend their learning. Teachers' use of questioning to challenge these pupils remains limited, and their expectations of these pupils are not high enough. There is insufficient opportunity for pupils to develop independent study skills and take responsibility for their own learning. Teachers are not always able to draw out links between curriculum areas, so pupils can explore themes across several areas of learning.

The school has established the foundations for a school-wide systematic approach to developing provision for higher ability and gifted and talented pupils, for example through identification of these groups of pupils and the inclusion of planning for them in lessons. However, there is not yet a coherent, purposeful and effective approach to match the excellent provision now established for developing pupils' basic skills. This needs to be developed urgently to ensure a school-wide approach which meets the needs of all pupils.

The teaching in class of pupils who have learning difficulties and disabilities has improved as a result of greater attention to assessment in planning and provision of a wider range of activities. However, some of these pupils, especially in the older classes, remain unenthusiastic about their learning. This is because teachers are relying too much on the structured activities planned for these pupils. The planning of these activities is good quality, and well matched to pupils' needs. However, they are not always supported by sufficiently dynamic, interesting direct teaching which catches the attention of pupils and motivates them to concentrate on the task.

The curriculum in Key Stages 1 and 2 has remained rightly focused on the core subjects of English and mathematics, with considerable attention given to sharpening the quality of provision for lower attaining pupils. Consideration is now being given to changing the way subjects are planned so that pupils have more opportunities to apply and develop their skills of literacy and numeracy in new and challenging situations. This is a positive and timely move, particularly insofar as it also supports ways in which learning can be

made more relevant and exciting for all pupils. The curriculum for the more able pupils is limited, which has reduced the achievement of these pupils. The curriculum for the Reception class meets the needs of the children in most areas. The lack of regular access to suitable outdoor provision, however, reduces learning in some important areas, including physical development, aspects of imaginative and creative development and elements of knowledge and understanding.

Pupils are well cared for and given good levels of personal support. There have been well-judged changes to the assessment systems although staffing changes have held back the consistency of their application across the school. More reliable information about pupils' achievement and progress is now available to staff. This is used by them to give a better match of work to meet the needs of the average and lower attaining pupils' needs but it is not yet used well enough to meet the needs of the highest attainers. Effective systems are in place for using marking to involve pupils in their own assessments and define their next steps in learning. These are not, however, consistently used.

Leadership and management

The school has managed the transition period of the headteacher's leave very well. The acting headteacher and substantive headteacher established a very good system of liaison and managed the transition period very smoothly, so that the improvement process was maintained without disruption. The interim headteacher, with the support of the senior management team, implemented planned developments well and to time. The phase co-ordinators' team has continued to develop and embed a system of monitoring and support for staff. This is good quality.

The school has a very good grasp of its strengths and areas for development, which are established through rigorous monitoring across a range of areas, such as work scrutiny, tracking of pupils' progress, and, increasingly, pupils' own views. The headteacher and senior managers have introduced very effective systems for summarising and communicating key issues to staff. As a consequence, staff are well aware of the steps they need to take both immediately and in the longer term to improve the pupils' education. The school is developing a good capacity to improve across a range of areas and with the involvement of all staff, and is now in a position to consolidate the very significant improvements it has made over the past three terms.

Systems and practice developed by the special needs coordinator are now well established and effective. As a result, provision for pupils who have

learning difficulties and disabilities has continued to improve. It is now satisfactory with many good features, such as the inclusion of planned activities for these pupils in class, linked to extremely effective additional work undertaken in small groups. The school is well aware of the importance of improving the basic skills of a significant number of pupils, and has taken very focused action which is resulting in considerable success.

Plans for bringing the Nursery classroom over to the main school building have not moved forward. The lack of suitable facilities and liaison in the Foundation Stage has a detrimental effect on children's learning. This needs to be progressed as soon as possible.

The governing body has undergone some changes in personnel, but has continued to provide a good level of support to the school. It has not yet developed any system for holding the school to account, but there are plans to establish a system which will enable this. The school continues to manage its day-to-day finances well.

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 a high level of support during the interim period of the headteacher's leave, but is rightly planning to reduce this in proportion to the school's increasing capacity to manage the improvement process independently and effectively. Its practical support in facilitating the secondment of a high quality acting headteacher and supporting the school through the transition process has been a significant factor in maintaining the pace of improvement.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measure - good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise the achievement of higher ability pupils.
- Establish systems by which the governing body challenges and holds the school to account.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrea Lyons
H M Inspector