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16 April 2007

Mr I Walker
The Headteacher
St Mark's C of E Primary School
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Dear Mr Walker

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST MARK'S C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Lorna Brackstone, Additional Inspector, to your school on 27 and 28 March 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in October 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, a representative from the local authority (LA), the subject leaders for English, mathematics, science, and the special educational needs coordinator.

Context

There have been considerable staff changes since the school's inspection in October 2006. Absences by staff have resulted in some pupils being taught by a series of temporary teachers. This has particularly affected provision at the end of Key Stage 2. During the time of the monitoring visit, pupils in Year 6 were on a visit to the local secondary school.

Achievement and standards

Standards on entry to the Nursery are below those expected for the children's age and communication, language and literacy skills are very weak. Children make good progress through the Foundation Stage to reach age related expectations by the start of Year 1. The latest figures from the end of Foundation Stage profile demonstrate that most children reach the expected level in reading, writing and mathematical development but few exceed the early learning goals. Over the last three years, attainment in Key Stage 1 has fallen. There is a significant variation between the standards achieved in reading, writing, and mathematics. Despite the good start most children make in mathematics during the Foundation Stage, few reach national expectations by the end of Year 2. Very few pupils attain the higher Level 3 in all subjects.

Ofsted's Raiseonline analysis for the 2006 national tests had not been published when the school was inspected in October. It shows that pupils' overall progress in Key Stage 2 was exceptionally low and had improved slightly on the previous year's position for English and mathematics, but had declined further in science.

The school's latest data shows that pupils' progress in Years 1 to 4 has improved slightly in reading and writing, but for pupils in Years 5 and 6 progress remains inadequate, especially in mathematics. Pupils' progress in science is not tracked. Standards are exceptionally low because some teachers have poor subject knowledge and there are too few opportunities for the pupils to apply skills learned in English, mathematics and science in other subjects.

Personal development and well-being

Attendance remains exceptionally low, but robust action has resulted in a small reduction in levels of absence. Pupils show little independence and find it difficult to focus on tasks for sustained periods. This is because activities in some lessons are insufficiently challenging or engaging and teachers do not always apply the school's policies on behaviour consistently. Therefore, pupils lose interest, become restless and, as a result, there is disruption to their learning. The number of fixed term exclusions has increased since the school's previous inspection in October 2006.

Quality of provision

The recruitment of well qualified and appropriately experienced teachers is proving difficult and this is hampering the school's efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning. There is very little good quality teaching and too much that is mundane or inadequate. Insufficient use is made of

information about what pupils know and can do. Therefore, teachers' expectations of the pupils' capabilities remain too low.

Teachers' plans are now more detailed. However, the activities set for pupils do not meet their needs, especially the more able pupils because the planning fails to distinguish clearly enough the precise level of work which individuals or small groups require to ensure they make adequate progress. Additionally, teachers are not assessing pupils' progress during lessons carefully enough to enable them to plan for the pupils' next steps in learning. Lessons are overlong, teachers talk too much, and there are too few opportunities for the pupils to be involved in their own learning. Consequently, the pace of learning is far too leisurely.

A new marking policy was introduced in January 2007. Nevertheless, not all teachers are implementing it. The quality of marking varies considerably within classes and across year groups. Marking is not effective in improving pupils' literacy because common errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar are not corrected often enough. Additionally, in some classes it does not show pupils how they can improve or point them to the next small steps in their learning. Whilst there are plans to monitor the quality of marking more closely, these have yet to be implemented.

Targets are set for pupils in literacy and numeracy. These are clearly displayed in the classrooms and in most books. However, the complex wording of the targets makes them difficult for the pupils to understand. Importantly, teachers do not refer to pupils' targets in lessons or in their marking of the pupils' work. Additionally, there is little linkage between these targets and the learning planned for future lessons.

There has been an improvement in the resources available, but they are not used well enough to support pupils' thinking or to extend their knowledge or understanding. Teachers are making more use of information and communication technology, such as interactive whiteboards. However, too few pupils are using computers in the classroom to support their learning.

The school has identified a significant proportion of pupils as having learning difficulties. The coordinator has rightly identified that a proportion of these pupils has additional needs rather than learning difficulties and is taking appropriate steps to ensure that the school establishes a coherent, well targeted programme of appropriate identification and support. Identified pupils now have individual education plans and these are available for the class teachers. At present, the school provides a small number of intervention programmes and is working with the LA to introduce and develop new strategies. Teaching assistants are not used effectively to support pupils' learning. Too often assistants sit passively whilst the teacher speaks to the whole class.

The school has appropriate plans to improve the quality of the curriculum and intends to provide training for teachers in new, highly structured approaches to the teaching of reading and writing. These, together with the organisational, timetabling and changes to the groupings of pupils, demonstrate that the school is on course to implement a new curriculum in the next academic year that will better match the pupils' stages of development. At present, there is no clear pathway for the teachers to follow and therefore the curriculum does not build upon the pupils' prior skills and knowledge.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2006:

- raise standards and improve achievement in English, mathematics, science and ICT by ensuring that the curriculum is better matched to the pupils' stages of development – satisfactory
- improve the quality of teaching and learning so that teachers have high expectations of all pupils, particularly higher attainers, and ensure that assessment information is used rigorously to move pupils on in their learning – inadequate
- ensure that pupils who have learning difficulties and disabilities have clear targets identified in their individual education plans so that their needs are consistently met in lessons – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and deputy headteacher have implemented a programme of observations to improve the quality of teaching and learning. However, these visits to classrooms are too infrequent to keep a check on whether the plans for improvement are taking place. The senior leaders have begun to monitor teachers' planning for lessons and provide written feedback. There is now a system in place to examine pupils' workbooks in order to check on progress. The school has recently introduced a robust system to track pupils' progress over time. This information has only been analysed by the senior team and has not been used to influence planning or teaching but will provide accurate information to hold teachers to account for the standards that pupils attain. Pupil progress meetings have been implemented but these are too new to have had any discernible impact.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2006:

- implement rigorous systems to ensure that staff are held accountable for the standards that pupils attain and are very clear as to what they need to do in order to raise those standards and improve achievement – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority has allocated funding to underpin its appropriate range of support. It has maintained its commitment to a demanding timescale of regular monitoring. Its statement of action is well focused with the school's key issues having been drawn into a coherent set of priorities. There has been a determination to keep a close watch on the school's development and to provide the necessary support and challenge when needed. Local authority advisory consultant staff have worked alongside teachers and have modelled good practice, some of which has been taken on board. The school would benefit from a greater focus on basic aspects of lesson structures, planning and classroom assessment processes.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

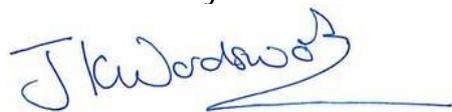
Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that teachers are very clear about what they want pupils to learn and how they will accurately assess what they have learned in order to plan for the next small steps.
- Improve teachers' subject knowledge in English and mathematics.
- Ensure that policies and practices are consistently implemented in each class.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Chief Education Officer for Dudley and the Director of Education for the Diocese of Worcester.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "J Wordsworth". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a horizontal line.

Jacqueline Wordsworth
H M Inspector