

29 June 2007

Mrs Janice Schofield
The Headteacher
Parsons Down Infant School
Paynesdown Road
Thatcham
RG19 3TE

Dear Mrs Schofield

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF PARSONS DOWN INFANT SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Sue Rogers, Additional Inspector, to your school on 19 and 20 June 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 December 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, groups of teachers and teaching assistants, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The context of the school is largely unchanged since the last monitoring visit in March 2007. Some new governors have joined. The number of pupils on roll, at 179, is similar to that in March. The school has appointed a caretaker and four teachers, including a deputy head, for September 2007.

Achievement and standards

Standards and achievement have risen this year. The results of national tests in Year 2 in 2007 show a clear improvement over those in 2006 for reading, writing and mathematics. Writing is still the relatively weakest area. Results were best in mathematics, as they have been in previous years. In all three areas, the 2007

results were broadly at or a little above the national averages of 2006. (National averages are not yet available for 2007.) In addition, the proportion of pupils reaching above expected levels (Level 3) increased significantly in 2007 and reflected the school's work on boosting the progress of more able pupils. These test results show that pupils made at least satisfactory progress over Years 1 and 2 overall. Moreover, these test results show that the rate of pupils' progress is improving because the groups of pupils taking tests in 2006 and 2007 had broadly similar starting points in Year 1.

Children in the Foundation Stage continue to make good progress in all areas of learning because provision for them is inviting, interesting and relevant. They start with a broad range of skills but many have weaknesses in language and communication. Some children are making excellent progress in phonics and exceeding the expected levels for their ages. A good range of challenging activities is enabling children in the Foundation Stage to learn well about the world around them. Children enjoyed greatly their day-long visit to Ufton Court. Follow up work the next day included the drawing of maps of the visit with annotations to an impressive standard. Pupils enter Year 1 having reached, in the main, the expected learning goals for the end of the Foundation Stage.

Whilst progress over Years 1 and 2 is now satisfactory overall, progress in lessons is very variable, ranging from good to inadequate, and is linked to the quality of teaching and learning. As at the time of the previous visit, there are still too few occasions where pupils make good progress. Pupils who have learning difficulties or disabilities are continuing to make satisfactory and sometimes good progress, often because teaching assistants work well, teaching, supporting and encouraging them.

The school has continued to develop its systems for assessing pupils' work and progress, and is compiling data about this in readily accessible ways. Staff now speak confidently about recording and analysing this data, and about its use to keep a check on how well pupils are doing and what their next steps in learning should be.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being continue to be good. Pupils are welcoming, friendly and cooperative. They are very well behaved and want to work. They listen well to teachers, helpers and each other. They like having clarity in lessons about what is to be learned and show satisfaction when their achievements are visible and applauded. Children in the Foundation Stage explore eagerly and are keen to talk about their work to visitors. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development continues to be satisfactory with some good features. Pupils understand about healthy eating and are aware of the need to respect safety rules. Pupils are reasonably well prepared for the next stage of their schooling and for their future economic well-being.

Quality of provision

There have been further improvements in teaching and learning since the last visit.

Lesson planning is generally improved and more consistently of at least satisfactory quality. Some teaching and learning are good. The better and effective teaching, in particular, has been strengthened, but there are still shortcomings in teaching and learning in places. Staff have good relationships with pupils in all lessons.

With the help of the LA, the school has been utilising the national Intensifying Support Programme (ISP) effectively to improve teaching. The programme has been successful in helping teachers set out the steps in pupils' learning. Teachers have been focussing on sharing learning objectives to ensure that pupils understand what they have to do next. Most teachers explain clearly what the lesson is about and what is expected. For example, a lesson on report writing made clear to pupils how to structure their writing with the use of highly appropriate resources. In some lessons, however, activities are not linked well enough with intended learning outcomes; pupils carry out the tasks diligently but are not sure what they have learned through doing them. In some inadequate lessons seen in both Years 1 and 2, expectations were not high enough, tasks were undertaken but without clarity of purpose, or the pace of learning was too slow. Teaching in the Foundation Stage continues to be good with pupils very involved in challenging and thoughtfully planned activities.

Teaching assistants continue to provide good support to pupils who need extra help, particularly those with learning difficulties and disabilities. The assistants are also being effectively deployed to work with more able pupils.

Teachers have grown in confidence in making use of assessment information. This has generally enabled them to raise their expectations of what pupils, particularly the more able, can achieve in writing and in other subjects. This was evident in a Year 2 art lesson where some pupils draw with considerable complexity and imagination because a challenging task had been set for them. Teachers are now keeping a close watch on pupils' progress and are identifying those pupils who are in danger of falling behind.

The school is planning to review and improve the curriculum with the aim of providing greater challenge, making it more creative, and simultaneously teaching pupils to be more creative. The school also plans to develop cross-curricular links so that skills learned in literacy, numeracy and ICT can be applied in other subjects, for example. Currently there are too few opportunities for pupils to use computers. Although there are a number of timetabled occasions for pupils to develop their reading skills, not all are sufficiently well planned to ensure that good progress is made in reading. Sometimes, the fruit eating sessions take up too much time or that time is not used productively enough.

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

- strengthen the teaching to raise standards, particularly for more able pupils, in writing and in the reception class – satisfactory progress
- improve assessment and target-setting so that work is better matched to the needs and abilities of the pupils – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

Progress in improving leadership and management is satisfactory but there are still some concerns about the school's capacity to improve unaided.

Standards have risen and the rate of pupils' progress speeded up because of improvements in teaching and better use of assessment information. Staff share the aim of raising standards and are very keen for the school to improve further but they are not all entirely sure about how the way forward is to be managed. This is because there are several different plans in use or in preparation somewhat limiting overall clarity of purpose and cohesion. Some plans, including the Raising Attainment Plan (RAP) that supports the ISP are reasonably well written with a clear focus on raising standards. The school is introducing more initiatives, whose finer details have yet to be determined, in the areas of creativity, developing cross-curricular links and challenge (problem solving and thinking skills). Whilst these initiatives are exciting the staff, and have some good features, they add yet another layer to planning. All these plans will require careful management, this at a time when the school welcomes four new members of teaching staff, including a new deputy head. A useful timescale for initiatives has been introduced but intended outcomes are not generally given in terms of their impact on pupils: this makes effective evaluation difficult. Some current evaluation by the school focuses too much on checking processes rather than determining if and how pupils' learning has improved.

The ISP work has had demonstrable impact on the teaching. Teaching has become stronger and planning has improved. However, there are still some weak areas. Not all teachers feel that they receive helpful feedback on areas that they need to improve. Job descriptions for subject leaders are not sharply enough focused on raising standards and achievement. Subject leaders undertake useful evaluations of the quality of provision but evaluations of outcomes are relatively weak.

Governance, at each monitoring visit, shows signs of becoming stronger and more resolute. The Governing Body is at full strength with governors who are keen to take on responsibilities and act as critical friends. It has some good strategies for keeping the school's progress out of special measures under review. Governors are aware of the fact that further work is required to ensure overall coherence across the school's various development plans and to ensure that clear links are made with the action plans and the school's overarching aims and objectives. Staff and governors, whilst regretting the departure of some highly valued colleagues, look forward to the next academic year and the freshness that new staff members are expected to bring.

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

- Improve leadership and sharpen school improvement planning so that it focuses on raising attainment and the achievements of the pupils – satisfactory progress

External support

Support and challenge from the Local Authority has been effective in several ways since the last monitoring visit. School staff value the work of consultants, particularly for mathematics, and the positive impact of the work is generally visible. The LA is keeping a good check on the school's progress through project team meetings and checks result in an accurate evaluation. An additional governor has been appointed by the LA, a school improvement partner (SIP) from another LA, and she has been instrumental in helping staff in this school to widen their horizons through visiting other schools, for example. There is still more work to be done on helping some staff to develop their skills in gauging pupils' progress in lessons ('assessment for learning') and in using ICT across the curriculum, for example. The LA has worked with the school to generate some good ideas for school improvement but further work is required to ensure that the plans are carefully enacted and managed.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Priorities for further improvement

No new priorities are given following this fourth monitoring visit but the one below, given after the third monitoring visit, is carried forward because it has only partially been attended to. Special attention should be paid to the last element that relates to improving teaching so that no inadequate teaching and learning remain.

- Establish more clearly the timeline for developments and actions over the next few months, with a view to completing the current five-part plan and developing an outline for future improvements. Ensure that actions for improvement are undertaken with good pace and clarity of purpose, particularly in the work to move the overall quality of teaching and learning from satisfactory to good.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Chief Improvement Advisor for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
H M Inspector