



14 May 2007

Mrs R Blakemore
Acting Headteacher
St Joseph's Catholic Primary School
Wheatland Lane
Wallasey
Merseyside
CH44 7ED

Dear Mrs Blakemore

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF St JOSEPH'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Jan Bennet HMI to your school on 10 and 11 May 2007 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 March 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, nominated staff, a group of pupils, the chair of governors and representatives of the local authority (LA). Informal discussions were also held with pupils and staff.

Context

The school continues to be led by an acting headteacher. One part-time member of staff has left the school. Two staff are absent on long-term sick leave and another is on maternity leave. One class is taught by a temporary teacher and one by a teaching assistant.

Achievement and standards

The standards achieved by pupils in the 2006 assessments were reported on in detail in the last monitoring letter. More recent validated data confirms that the overall progress made by pupils in Key Stage 2 in 2006 was significantly below average.

Inspection evidence indicates that across the school pupils are making satisfactory progress overall in their learning and that standards are rising. Pupils in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 are making satisfactory progress overall in their learning. Some, such as those in Year 1, are making good progress due to good teaching. Currently, pupils in Year 6 are also making good progress. This is despite their low starting point and some disruption to their learning in the spring term due to staff absence and unavoidable changes in staffing. Stability has now been restored to this year group and the momentum in learning has been regained. Although standards in Year 6 remain below average, assessment information provided by the school suggests that standards in English, mathematics and science are set to rise above last year's poor results. Underachievement has been identified and a number of strategies have been deployed to raise attainment. For example, a specialist from the LA has taught extra classes in science. Pupils have also benefited from lunchtime mathematics clubs. Additional adults have been used well to provide daily sessions for pupils who have fallen behind in reading. The school's assessment data indicates that more pupils are working consistently at the level expected of them and that some are exceeding this. The school is realistic about the distance it must travel in order to fully overcome the legacy of underachievement.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being continue to be satisfactory. Relationships between pupils and teachers are good and pupils are courteous. Behaviour around the school is satisfactory and is good in lessons. Pupils generally play well together and have opportunities to take part in playground activities at lunchtime using recently purchased equipment. A number of older pupils act as play leaders. The school has continued to implement a range of strategies to improve attendance. It works closely with the LA attendance officer to support the families of children with attendance problems. Parents are notified of absence by telephone, and parents of persistent absentees are called in for interview. The school works hard to promote the importance of punctuality and regular attendance. For example, class and individual prizes are presented for good attendance in assemblies. Despite this persistent effort by the school to promote and encourage regular attendance, the average attendance rate has fallen last term and is well below average.

Quality of provision

The school has improved the quality of teaching and learning since the previous monitoring inspection despite not having a full complement of permanent teachers and some long-term staff absence. Inadequate teaching has been addressed and all teaching is now satisfactory or better. Teaching assistants are effective, particularly in their work with the less able pupils and

those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD). They are deployed well and work closely with teachers to enhance learning and improve behaviour.

In lessons where teaching and learning were good, planning was thorough and well evaluated. Learning resources were interesting and varied. Interactive whiteboards were used well and the range of activities met the needs of pupils of all levels of ability and different preferred learning styles. Questions were carefully targeted at individual pupils to check their understanding and to challenge their thinking. Success criteria were used well, providing pupils with a useful list against which to check their own and each other's work. Any silly behaviour was nipped swiftly in the bud. In satisfactory lessons, the pace of learning was slower. Opportunities were missed to use questioning to extend learning. Important points were not stressed sufficiently and consequently these were missed by some pupils. Not all pupils were fully engaged; their attention drifted and they did not join in the question-and-answer sessions.

The quality of marking and assessment varies but there is some very good practice. Work is regularly marked and pupils are given encouragement and praise but some teachers give insufficient constructive feedback to help pupils to improve. Most pupils, but not all, know the National Curriculum level at which they are working. There is greater use of learning targets. These are displayed in all classrooms and used effectively in the best lessons so that pupils know what they are aiming for. There are bright displays in classrooms, but little written work by pupils is displayed. There are also few exemplars of good work, to motivate and encourage pupils. The practice of setting homework is varied but there are some examples of good practice which reinforce and extend learning. The school recognises that it needs to draw up a homework policy to ensure a greater consistency of approach.

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

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning to raise achievement and standards in English, mathematics and science – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher is providing sound leadership for the school and works well with the acting deputy headteacher to promote improvement. The school's understanding of its strengths and weaknesses has been sharpened but there is scope to improve this further. Effective steps have been taken to provide greater clarity about initiatives and improvement measures taken by the school. Minutes of meetings, which include decisions about improvement, are now distributed to all staff. Weekly briefings for teaching assistants have been introduced. Action has been taken to ensure that new policies are

adhered to. Nonetheless, some key deadlines, such as that for the completion of assessment data, have been missed.

A number of measures have been taken to increase the accountability of staff. The progress of the revised school improvement plan is regularly tracked. The new plan sets out much more clearly who is responsible for carrying out each part of the plan. Job descriptions and statutory arrangements for the performance management of teachers have been put in place. Targets for these have been usefully linked to improving the performance of groups of underachieving pupils. Performance management arrangements have also been extended to teaching assistants. A staff meeting has been held on the roles and responsibilities of subject managers. Appropriate action has been taken by the acting headteacher, with the advice and support of the LA, to begin tackling the issue of long-term staff absence.

The monitoring of teaching has been extended and is becoming a regular part of school life. A school improvement officer from the LA has provided training on monitoring. Subsequently, all staff have been observed teaching science by the science subject manager and the acting headteacher or an LA officer. Suitable plans exist for monitoring literacy lessons. Pupils' work and teachers' planning of the core subjects are now regularly checked by subject leaders and senior managers, and summaries that indicate areas to develop are given to staff. More training in checking the quality of the school's work is planned for key staff. 'Learning walks' have also been undertaken by the acting headteacher and general feedback from these is shared with staff. The acting headteacher has also held informal interviews with pupils to ascertain the impact of initiatives.

Improvements have been made to the school environment, such as developing the outdoor facilities for the Foundation Stage. Links with parents have been strengthened. Parents have been kept informed about staffing changes and the school's efforts to minimise disruption to learning. Letters detailing the system for pupils' academic targets have been sent home and this has been further explained at parents' evenings. Parents of pupils with LDD have been invited to reviews of learners' individual education plans. Older pupils with LDD have also been involved in these meetings. The school has hosted a number of workshops, for example in craft, cookery and information and communication technology, in order to promote links with parents.

Staff have worked hard to put into place key elements of a national strategy aimed at raising achievement. This 'Intensifying Support Project' (ISP) is strongly supported by the school's leadership and is beginning to have an impact on teaching and learning. Targets for groups of pupils in the core subjects are prominently displayed in all classes in a common format. Pupils report that 'learning walls', which emphasise key learning points, have helped

them improve their work, and that they are frequently referred to by teachers.

Satisfactory progress has been made in tackling issues identified at the last monitoring visit. A policy for teaching and learning has been agreed. Where weaknesses in teaching have been identified, effective support has been offered. Staff meetings regularly focus on improving aspects of teaching and learning, such as effective questioning. A training day has been held on assessment methods, and procedures for checking and tracking pupils' progress have been extended. Although there are gaps in this information, it is analysed by senior managers and is being used increasingly by teachers to inform planning and target underperformance. The progress of pupils with LDD is also more clearly tracked. A system to gauge pupils' pastoral development and learning attitudes has been introduced. It is hoped that this will assist in identifying underperformance.

Good use is being made of the LA's consultants. One has checked assessments of pupils' written work. Others have worked alongside staff in monitoring the quality of pupils' work, and useful messages from this process have been passed onto staff. Another well received training session on the features of a successful school has been led by an external consultant. A consultant from another school has advised on a new assessment system for the Foundation Stage.

The governing body is in the process of appointing a permanent headteacher. It has provided strong support for the acting headteacher, particularly in ensuring that new policies are complied with. It has continued to grow into its role as a critical friend to the school. There is a greater willingness to tackle underperformance and to hold the school to account for its work. A strategy committee regularly reviews the school's progress. Governors are better informed about staffing, teaching and learning issues and barriers to improvement. They have attended useful training about performance management. Link governors for numeracy, literacy and science have visited lessons and reported back on their findings. Several new governors with relevant experience have joined the governing body. However, there is, as yet, no separate development plan for the governing body.

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

- Improve leadership and management so that:
 - the school has clear direction for improvement
 - monitoring ensures that staff at all levels are made accountable for standards and performance – satisfactory progress

External support

The LA has continued to provide extensive and good support for the school. Its consultants have led the ISP and others have visited the school to advise on improvement issues and on monitoring. The school has also drawn on the LA's personnel resources. A school improvement officer monitors the school's progress and has provided training for staff. The acting headteacher is supported by the headteacher of a local school. The diocese has arranged training on successful schools. Satisfactory links exist with a local special school.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Build on good practice to further raise the proportion of consistently good teaching.
- Ensure that all improvement measures, such as new assessment procedures, are consistently and fully embedded in the work of the school.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Director of Children's Services for Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and to the diocese.

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
H M Inspector