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13 July 2007

Mr J Fish
Headteacher
St Mary's Church of England Aided Primary School
Rectory Lane
Prestwich
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Lancashire
M25 1BP

Dear Mr Fish

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of St Mary's Church of England Aided Primary School, Prestwich

Introduction

Following my visit with Anna Dawson, Additional Inspector, to your school on 9 and 10 July 2007, 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 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 visited lessons in each class and an assembly. A range of documents was examined and pupils' conduct was observed. Discussions were held with the headteacher, key staff, the school council, the vice-chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the last monitoring visit, the interim headteacher has been appointed to the post of permanent headteacher. There has been no other significant change in staffing.

Achievement and standards

There is a clear and intense focus on raising pupils' standards and improving their achievement. With the help of the LA, teachers have been trained in a range of ways to monitor and measure pupils' progress. This was introduced initially in literacy and numeracy and is paying off well. Compared with English and mathematics, evaluating pupils' progress in science is at an early stage, but is showing signs of improving teaching and learning and, subsequently, pupils' achievement.

Although the assessments in reading, writing and mathematics in March 2007 identified a substantial number of pupils who were underachieving, the school analysed why this was happening and introduced a broad range of support strategies. Overall, booster work and additional support for those with the greatest needs are proving increasingly effective. The extent of those pupils underachieving has reduced. Pupils' standards in national assessments at Years 2 and 6 in 2007 are much stronger than in the previous year. However, from analysing its national assessment results and other checks of pupils' progress, the school is accurate in identifying that overall, achievement of potentially higher attaining pupils could be stronger still. This is particularly so in boys' achievement in English by Year 2, and in girls' achievement in mathematics by Year 6.

The headteacher and senior leaders continue to identify clearly the appropriate steps to be taken to improve pupils' standards and achievement. As a result, pupils are progressing more rapidly than was previously the case. Staff are much clearer now as to what the next step is in learning for each pupil, and so, too, are the pupils, who understand and work towards their individual targets. Staff are keen to press on with improvements. For example, the school has asked the LA to support staff in looking at ways of improving pupils' understanding of fractions and percentages. Parents have noticed that in asking teachers about how well their children are doing, they now refer to detailed evidence of what their child was doing at a point in the past and where they are now.

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

- Raise standards and improve children's achievement in reading, writing, mathematics and science – good

Personal development and well-being

Children are polite and enjoy school. They show good interest in lessons, for example, when in Year 6 they use the interactive whiteboard to 'bin' ideas they no longer feel are valid, and in Year 3 when acting in different roles with their 'talking partners'. Attendance, previously judged good, has improved further. The school council continues to work hard on behalf of other pupils. Its members are particularly proud of the outdoor and adventure playground equipment they have on order. Play leaders, and older pupils helping Nursery children at lunchtime, are examples of pupils growing in maturity and exhibiting good qualities of citizenship and independence.

Quality of provision

There has been good improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, which is evident especially in Years 2 to 6. A major contributing factor to the overall improvement has been a more rigorous approach to monitoring teaching and learning by senior leaders and coordinators, and taking effective action to support areas of weakness. Subject coordinators in English and mathematics have continued to improve the detail of their understanding of issues for development through analysing pupils' work, teachers' planning and lesson observations across the school. The evaluations of lesson observations shared with teachers have revealed, for instance, where training would be beneficial and have helped staff to gain a more accurate view of their own performance.

With the help of the LA, training in English, mathematics and science has increased staff's expertise and confidence and helped them to work towards common goals and targets. Consequently, teachers' planning is much better than it was. They share learning objectives with pupils with greater consistency. There is an improving match of work to the different needs of the pupils. Learning objectives are reviewed at the end of lessons to check pupils' learning and overcome misconceptions. The quality of teachers' marking has improved, particularly in writing and mathematics. Positive comments encourage pupils to try harder and remarks about the quality of their work help them understand how to improve. However, there are some higher attaining children who are not always sufficiently challenged.

The school has developed further its assessment systems and established more effective ways of tracking pupils' progress. Good improvement has been seen in the use made of data on pupils' progress to raise standards. There is a comprehensive assessment calendar, to which the staff adhere. Pupils' progress is tracked and assessed every half term. With the help of the LA, teachers have an accurate view of the levels pupils are reaching. Teachers are now confident in using the data on pupils' progress to set targets for groups and individuals. Because of the regularity of assessment, any underachievement is spotted quickly. However, the system does not fully pick up on and track progress from the starting point in the Nursery through to the end of the Foundation Stage.

Teaching assistants have been well trained in their supporting roles to deliver programmes in English and mathematics designed to help pupils catch up and consolidate learning. This intervention is paying off also for those learning English as an additional language and others with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

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

- Use information from tracking children's progress and from monitoring the quality of provision to improve the quality of teaching and learning – good

Leadership and management

The headteacher, staff and governors are playing their full part in driving on with improvements. Staff are enthusiastic and motivated. Improvements have gathered pace in the last few months. There is a greater consistency in the quality of provision within different subjects and across the age and ability range of the pupils. This is especially so in Years 2 to 6. Plans are in place and work is under way to improve the learning environment, resources and provision in the Foundation Stage

Governors are much clearer about the strengths of provision and are more involved in making strategic decisions. They gain insight using an increasing range of methods including detailed reports from the headteacher, direct monitoring of school life and discussion with subject coordinators. Very good support from the LA is focused in contributing to each stage of the school's progression; for example, in providing training for staff in the best ways to teach pupils to carry out science investigations, boosting Year 6 pupils in mathematics and in how to ensure pupils understand what are the next steps they have to take in their learning.

Literacy, numeracy and science coordinators check increasingly effectively on the quality of teachers' planning and pupils' work. Their focus on gauging how well pupils progress in their work has paid dividends in understanding what the pupils know and what more they need to learn. They check to see if strategies agreed by staff are followed consistently. Coordinators are implementing strategies for the long term. Teaching and learning are strengthening and the pupils' underachievement in their work is reducing.

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

- Strengthen the capacity of governors, the acting headteacher and other managers to check how well the school is doing and to take appropriate action to secure improvement – good

External support

The LA is providing very good support to the school. Consultants and advisers respond quickly to the needs identified by the school. Their support is valued greatly, particularly in school self-evaluation, which has sharpened considerably since the inspection in October 2006.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since the previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed at Key Stage 2.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the achievement of: all higher attaining pupils in English by Year 6; higher attaining boys in writing; and higher attaining girls in mathematics by Year 2.
- Ensure children's starting points in the Foundation Stage are analysed more securely to give the school a firm foundation for measuring pupils' overall progress.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Director of Education and Culture for Bury, and the Director of the Diocese of Manchester.

Yours sincerely

Adrian Simm
Additional Inspector