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Mrs J Betts
The Headteacher
Squirrel Hayes First School
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Dear Mrs Betts

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF SQUIRREL HAYES FIRST SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Carol Parkinson, Additional Inspector, to your school on 2 and 3 May 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 November 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 assistant headteacher, the coordinators for literacy and numeracy, the chair of governors, groups of pupils and representatives from the local authority.

Context

At the end of the autumn term 2006 the assistant headteacher left the school to take up a senior post at another school. One of the school's class teachers was subsequently appointed to the post of assistant headteacher and started in this role at the beginning of the spring term 2007. The governors have also recruited an additional teaching assistant.

Achievement and standards

Standards are generally below average and pupils' achievement is not yet good enough or improving at a sufficiently speedy rate. The school's assessments of pupils' achievements have been checked by the headteacher and assistant headteacher but have not been sufficiently moderated or validated by the local authority. It is important that these assessments are moderated as some of the levels awarded are not supported by the quality of the pupils' work. Similarly, the school's records of individual pupils' progress are at times over generous and do not reflect the teachers' assessments. Evidence from lesson observations indicates that pupils' progress is too slow and directly related to weaknesses in the quality of teaching.

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

- raise standards and increase rates of pupils' progress – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils behave well and have very positive attitudes to their work. Relationships between pupils and between adults and pupils are good. The pupils are courteous, keen to talk about their work, and very welcoming to visitors. They enjoy coming to school and always try to do their best, even when their work is too difficult or too easy.

Quality of provision

Important changes have been made to the curriculum and daily timetables. This has led to more focused and targeted intervention and support for groups of pupils, which is beginning to make a positive impact on raising achievement. However, there is also a negative impact of the targeted group work. On occasions, time is wasted when pupils are required to start a lesson but not complete the work set, because they are subsequently withdrawn for separate support in small groups. The timetable in Year 1 does not currently provide sufficient focus on teaching literacy and numeracy each day of the week.

Significant weaknesses remain in teachers' daily planning. Learning objectives are sometimes confused with the pupils' activities and the pupils' tasks do not take enough account of the different starting points. For some pupils their work is far too easy, whilst others are confused about what they're expected to do because their work is too difficult. Following initial feedback at the end of the first day of the inspection, teachers amended their daily plans to provide work that was better matched to the pupils' different ability levels. This is a satisfactory start although much remains to be done to ensure that all pupils make faster progress. There is currently too little emphasis given to teaching important new skills and knowledge that will extend pupils' understanding. The overall quality of teaching remains

inadequate because assessments are not yet used effectively enough to plan work that accelerates progress and meets the learning needs of all pupils. This was reported in the previous inspection.

Whilst pupils know that their work should reflect a lesson's success criteria and they can talk about what they are expected to learn, they are unsure about their personal targets for improvement, particularly in relation to basic skills in writing. The pupils' work is marked regularly and some teachers' comments are helpful. Nevertheless, there is insufficient focus on eliminating repeated errors, particularly in writing.

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

- improve the quality of teaching so that all pupils are suitably challenged and their differing needs are met – inadequate.

Leadership and management

Some improvements have been made in strategic planning. The action plan and subject action plans in English and mathematics provide a sound framework for further development. The subject leaders for literacy and numeracy are enthusiastic and keen to improve their role in monitoring and evaluation, and have made a sound start in doing so. The headteacher and assistant headteacher have introduced a more coherent approach to tracking pupils' progress and achievements. They are starting to use this information to hold teachers to account for the standards achieved by the pupils in their care. The school's assessment information is intended to show how well each pupil is doing and whether they are on track to meet their targets. However, the data and the analysis of the data currently present an inaccurate picture of progress and sometimes confuse attainment with achievement.

The school's work is beginning to be monitored more effectively than previously. However, monitoring and evaluation arrangements are not yet sufficiently systematic and rigorous, particularly in relation to checking the quality of teaching and learning. There is very little reference to the impact of teaching on the pupils' progress in lessons, which means that there has been far too little focus on evaluating teachers' work in relation to how well the pupils have achieved. Written feedback to teachers identifies many areas for improvement but does not prioritise them. The feedback neither indicates when teachers are expected to bring about improvements to their work nor what help they can expect to achieve this. The school's self-evaluation is over generous and does not sufficiently reflect important weaknesses that remain.

The role of the governors in holding the school's leaders and managers to account for the standards achieved by the pupils is improving. Governors' committees meet regularly to check the school's progress and have received information about the pupils' achievements. The chair of governors reports that the governing body is asking more searching questions about the school's performance than previously.

These are all important developments and provide a more secure basis for further improvement.

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

- more rigorously evaluate and monitor the school's work to bring about rapid improvement – inadequate.

External support

The local authority has made revisions to its original statement of action. It has made clear how far it was aware of the school's problems before the inspection in November 2006 and has identified different persons to monitor and evaluate the school's performance. Considerable support and help has been provided by local authority personnel, particularly to improve the quality of teaching and learning and the school's monitoring of the quality of education, although the impact of this work has been limited. The local authority review in March 2007 judged the quality of teaching good and that the school had the capacity to improve. These findings are not supported by this inspection. Significant weaknesses remain in the quality of teaching and the school's monitoring and evaluation of its performance is not sufficiently rigorous or accurate.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

There are no further priorities for improvement. The school should tackle the key areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2006 with greater rigour and an increased sense of urgency.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director of Children and Lifelong Learning for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Watters
Her Majesty's Inspector