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Ms J Gazeley
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Dear Ms Gazeley

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of Burnt Tree Junior and Infant School

Introduction

Following my visit with Nancy Walker, Additional Inspector, to your school on 16 and 17 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 deputy headteacher, the leaders of mathematics and science, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The Foundation Stage teacher has been absent due to illness since the start of the summer term.

Achievement and standards

Standards are below average overall. Pupils' skills are uneven and there are gaps in their knowledge. However, improved planning and teaching have led to pupils making better progress and standards are rising accordingly in Key Stages 1 and 2. In the Foundation Stage, children's progress has been limited until recently when some positive changes to provision have begun to have a favourable impact on their learning.

The standard of work in pupils' books in English, mathematics and science has generally improved and many books shows steady progress. In some classes, pupils show a pride in their work and good presentation, as well as content, is clearly encouraged. However, there is still too much variation across the school in the quality and quantity of work produced by pupils when they are working independently. The leadership team's regular analyses of pupils' work have made them aware of this issue and members have begun to take appropriate action to address it. Work to improve standards in information and communication technology (ICT) is at an early stage of development.

In lessons, pupils generally made satisfactory progress. Progress was quickest when the task was well matched to pupils' current level of attainment, where they were given the opportunity to think for themselves and were asked challenging questions to help them rather than told the answer.

Assessment systems have been developed satisfactorily and a tracking system assists appropriate analysis. The leadership team's aspirations are suitably high and these have been communicated to staff through a series of meetings. However, because the school is using two different systems for analysing and tracking pupils' progress, some contradictory information has been produced leading to a lack of clarity. The headteacher is aware that the basis on which targets are set for pupils also needs clarification.

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

- raise standards in English, mathematics, science and ICT throughout the school to ensure that all pupils reach their full potential – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour and attitudes towards learning are positive. Pupils cooperate well with each other and with staff and respond very well when they experience interesting and enjoyable lessons. The school has worked hard to improve pupils' attendance and punctuality to good effect. Pupils and families increasingly understand the importance of regular and prompt attendance and fewer take holidays in school time. The much improved learning environment and atmosphere contribute well to pupils' enjoyment of school.

Good quality displays focus on learning and recognise pupils' effort and achievement.

Quality of provision

The school has correctly identified that some of the previous assessment of children's progress in the Foundation Stage has been inaccurate. Good quality support from the LA has recently helped to remedy this. As a consequence, staff have begun to have a better understanding of what children can do and what they need to learn next. Appropriate teaching programmes and resources have been introduced to improve children's communication, language and literacy skills. The Foundation Stage staff have responded well to the support which they have received and have begun to form a cohesive and enthusiastic team. They have worked hard this term to improve the learning environment, particularly outdoors, which has started to enable children to have a broader and more enjoyable learning experience.

The quality of teaching has improved. Teaching seen during the visit was satisfactory overall. The leadership team has rightly focused on helping staff to improve the quality of their planning and the lesson structures. As a result, staff's competence and confidence in creating and teaching interesting and appropriate lessons has improved. Lessons observed during the monitoring visit were characterised by clearly structured planning, enthusiastic teaching, and sound subject knowledge. All lessons had a learning objective, although these varied in their precision. The best lessons had a good pace, questioning was well focused, and success criteria were used very well to communicate to the pupils what they needed to achieve. In these lessons, pupils rose to the challenge and made good progress.

The accuracy of the school's assessment of pupils' levels of attainment in Key Stages 1 and 2 has improved. This has enabled teachers to be better informed about the next steps in pupils' learning and teachers have started to use this information appropriately to plan lessons. Improving the match of work to pupils' current levels of attainment has been effective for most pupils in all classes. However, lessons observed and the work in books indicates that this is still too variable, particularly for the highest attaining pupils who do not always receive sufficiently challenging work. Marking is more thorough and frequent, although the senior team has accurately identified that marking still needs to focus more on telling pupils what they need to do to improve.

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

- improve provision in the Foundation Stage so that children can make better progress in reading, writing and mathematics – satisfactory

- improve the quality of teaching and learning throughout the school so that teachers have higher expectations of all pupils and that assessment information is used regularly to plan tasks to meet pupils' needs – good.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has worked hard and effectively to bring about positive change. Together with the leadership team, she has taken a series of suitable actions which have secured significant improvement. Monitoring and evaluation activities are more sharply focused. As a result, the leadership team is better able to hold staff to account and has developed an accurate understanding of the school's strengths and the priorities for further improvement. For example, members have rightly identified that many pupils need further help to develop their vocabulary.

Staff have responded very well to the increased level of challenge. Teachers now understand the extent to which they are accountable for ensuring that the pupils in their class make good progress and support staff understand the key role that they have in supporting learning. Lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work are thorough, and the resulting feedback to staff is clear. Several teachers have benefited significantly from team teaching with the deputy headteacher. Leaders of English, mathematics and science have taken on a higher profile in leading developments in these subjects and their monitoring and evaluation is increasingly secure.

The governing body has remained loyal to the school and meetings are well attended. The chair of governors is dedicated to his role and has a sound understanding of the progress that the school is making. Support from the LA has assisted the governors in asking pertinent questions of the school. Governors have worked particularly hard to develop and maintain relationships with the community.

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

- improve leadership, management and governance by ensuring that the school is held accountable for the standards that the pupils attain – good.

External support

The school improvement adviser has provided the school with very good, highly focused support. He has a secure understanding of the school's needs and has been particularly effective in supporting the development of the leadership team. His careful coordination of the rest of the local authority's support has ensured that all support has a well thought out purpose which has led to improvement. Support for the Foundation Stage has been particularly valuable and recently has had a good impact on improving provision. The local authority is committed to continuing to provide this high

level of support and to provide additional appropriate support should the school appoint newly qualified teachers from September.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good.

Two newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Clarify the basis on which targets are set for pupils and refine the targets accordingly.
- Improve the quality and presentation of pupils' independent work.
- Ensure that work consistently matches pupils' needs and that the highest attaining pupils are suitably challenged.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Sandwell.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
H M Inspector