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Mrs Kim Taylor
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Dear Mrs Taylor

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF SPRING COMMON SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Jill Smith, Additional Inspector to your school on 22 and 23 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.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the leadership team, groups of teachers and teaching assistants, the chair of governors, and a representative from the Local Authority (LA).

Context

Since the previous inspection the headteacher has resigned from his post. In January 2007 a local authority inspector became acting headteacher. She was recently appointed to the substantive post and took up this role on 1 May.

Achievement and standards

Recent assessments of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, carried out across the school, substantiate the finding of the previous inspection that many pupils are not making enough progress in these crucial areas of learning. In lessons observed during the monitoring inspection, pupils generally made satisfactory progress, because the teaching met their needs. Occasionally lessons focused on skills or knowledge which pupils had already acquired, or which were too advanced, leading to inadequate progress. Several pupils with challenging behaviour are now making better progress because of their inclusion in groups which are more appropriate to their academic and social needs.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour during the monitoring inspection was good. Working relationships are positive. Pupils' attitudes to work are good and they are keen to do their best. All members of staff have recently received behaviour management training and this is leading to a much greater consistency of approach. Pupils feel more secure and learning takes place within a calm and ordered atmosphere. The school environment has also improved; classrooms are tidy and brightened by the colourful displays of pupils' work. Pupils increasingly enjoy the time they spend at school and get on well with each other. They cope well with visitors and are tolerant towards other pupils who exhibit more demanding behaviour. Attendance continues to be good.

The headteacher has accurately identified weaknesses in the provision of specialist services, such as physiotherapy. In order to improve provision, she has arranged a series of multi-agency meetings to discuss the range and level of support required.

Quality of provision

The last inspection expressed severe concerns about shortcomings in the management of and support for pupils with the most challenging behaviour, and staff training and expertise in this aspect of work. Since then, all adults have undertaken appropriate training in positive intervention strategies and pupils with the most challenging behaviour have joined their peers throughout the school. These changes have led to a significant improvement in the overall standard of their behaviour and in their well-being and adults speak highly of the way in which this move has led to an enhanced sense of school unity and shared sense of purpose.

The quality of teaching observed during the monitoring inspection was satisfactory overall. All lessons began with an objective, reflecting improvements the efforts staff have made to improve their planning. These varied in their quality. The best objectives were precise and focused on what the pupils were expected to learn during the lesson; the weakest were tasks rather than learning objectives. Staff and pupils had good relationships and there was sensitivity to pupils' personal needs. Pupils had positive attitudes to their learning and tried hard to complete the work they were set. In the best lessons teachers had planned a range of tasks to meet the range of needs in the class. For example in one lesson two different versions of the same text, one with more pictures and one with more complicated vocabulary, were used to enable pupils to read independently. In these lessons there was a suitably high level of challenge, and pupils rose to this and enjoyed their learning. In the weaker lessons there was a lack of pace and the work was not suitable for pupils' needs.

Planning has improved significantly, greatly aided by the introduction of a common planning format which the headteacher has sensibly insisted that all staff use. The quality of planning is still too variable but many staff have responded well to the advice and support they have been given. The best planning takes account of the desired learning outcomes for each individual in the class and the activities are designed accordingly.

The school has begun to take appropriate action to remedy the considerable weaknesses in assessment. After several training sessions a recent 'assessment week' involved teachers and teaching assistants working together to assess pupils' current levels of attainment in numeracy and literacy and to revise targets accordingly. The leadership team provided useful support to teachers with this process. The headteacher has sensible plans to work with other special schools to moderate these initial judgements and to adjust targets accordingly.

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

- As a matter of urgency address staff training and monitoring of procedures to ensure the management of behaviour is at least satisfactory at all times - good progress
- Improve the quality of teaching and ensure effective assessment so that all pupils can make the best possible progress – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

The headteacher has established a calm school which functions smoothly on a day to day basis. She took decisive action to improve the provision for a group of pupils with challenging behaviour, to good effect. Staff's initial

apprehension was overcome by a combination of training and support and they are now very positive about the benefits to both pupils and staff. A greater emphasis on teamwork throughout the school has improved the way lessons are led and managed and has started to make better use of the skills of teaching assistants. The headteacher has rightly identified that the current staffing structure is inadequate and taken thorough action to enable an improved one to be in place by September. The headteacher has a sound understanding of the need for swift improvement to take place. Crucially, she has communicated her suitably high expectations to staff. Most have responded well, although she has met some resistance to the increased demands.

The headteacher has begun to establish procedures for monitoring and evaluation. These have been well used with regard to behaviour. Others are at an early stage of development. A useful training exercise involved all staff in analysing their own planning in teams which helped them to understand what was required. Subsequent monitoring led to feedback on strengths and weaknesses, which some staff have used well to make improvements. Lesson observations have been carried out by the LA and the leadership team. However, these have not yet formed a regular, planned cycle of observations, and they are insufficiently focused on the progress which pupils are making.

The senior leadership team has been appropriately expanded to include the school nurse. The headteacher has worked closely with the leadership team to help them to understand their roles. Although she is waiting to agree their specific job descriptions until the reorganisation of roles across the school is finalised, the team is nevertheless more aware of what is expected of them as leaders and managers, and of the day to day tasks they need to complete. They have been supportive in implementing the new behaviour management strategies and reinforcing some of the key principles to staff. The leadership team's monitoring is of variable quality and rigour and is sometimes over-generous in its judgements, indicating a need for increased training and support.

The chair of the governing body has a good understanding of the school's strengths and the areas which need to improve. The school's action plan is wide ranging but lacks clear milestones and it is sometimes unclear who is responsible for which actions. This limits the governors' awareness of what the school intends to achieve by which date. The chair and committee chairs are aware of this issue and have suitable plans to work with the school to address it. Nevertheless, because the governing body is receiving improved information from the school they are now better placed overall to challenge and support the school's development.

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

- Establish regular monitoring and rigorous evaluation so that there is a clear view of strengths and areas for development across the school - satisfactory progress.
- Refine leadership and management roles so that there are clear lines of accountability to ensure policy is consistently implemented – satisfactory progress

External support

Following the previous inspection the LA seconded the inspector for inclusion to the school as acting headteacher which enabled improvement to begin. They have arranged some additional support for the leadership team which has started to improve their skills in monitoring and evaluation. However, the headteacher does not have regular or rigorous enough support from the LA to assist her in her challenging role, or to help the leadership team to become effective with the required urgency. This limits the extent to which the school can develop the necessary capacity to improve.

Useful support has been provided for some other aspects of the school's work. Support from two literacy consultants, for example, has been valuable in supporting the new co-ordinator to develop an action plan.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Establish a regular, rigorous cycle of lesson observations in order to gain a clear picture of the quality of pupils' learning in each class across the school.
- Moderate the baseline assessment information and begin to use this to plan lessons and to assess progress

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

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King

H M Inspector