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Mrs J Barke
The Headteacher
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Northamptonshire
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Dear Mrs Barke

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST JAMES CEVA PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Paul Brooker HMI to your school on 15 and 16 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 a group of pupils, the headteacher, nominated staff, the chair and vice chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Following the inspection in November 2006, one member of the teaching staff resigned and was replaced by a teacher on a temporary contract. In December the school bursar resigned resulting in new appointments to the administration team. The governors are in the process of recruiting two teachers and a deputy headteacher for the new school year. During this inspection, national tests were being carried out for Year 6 pupils leading to a disruption in the timetable.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in the school remains inadequate because too many pupils, including the more able, have not made the expected progress. Standards attained by pupils by the time they reach Year 6 are well below average.

The school has adopted new assessment procedures enabling teachers to develop a better understanding about the progress pupils are expected to make. A new tracking system identifies the progress made by each pupil. This information is beginning to be used more consistently by teachers to plan lessons that are pitched at the right level for all pupils. In the lessons where assessment information is used in this way there are encouraging signs that pupils are making better progress. However, teachers are not yet fully exploiting this information in order to inform pupils of what they need to do to improve their work.

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

- raise standards and improve achievement by establishing clear assessment procedures so that teachers know how well pupils are doing and can plan work matched to their needs – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

The school has worked hard to strengthen pupils' personal development, particularly social skills, which are often weak. The good relationships between adults and pupils, and the positive climate for learning, ensure that pupils feel happy and well supported at school. The designated specialist provision plays a key role in developing the self esteem and personal skills of many of the pupils, including the most vulnerable.

Pupils are generally well behaved in lessons. They have positive attitudes to learning and are keen to volunteer answers. Pupils follow instructions and collaborate well when working in pairs and small groups. When teaching is lively and engaging, pupils are enthusiastic and enjoy their work. The challenging behaviour of a small number of pupils is generally well managed so that it does not disrupt the work of others. However, where there is misbehaviour in lessons it is linked to weaker teaching. Around the school and at break times, pupils interact sensibly and show consideration for others.

Attendance has increased slightly but remains well below average. The school has taken suitable steps to identify and address high levels of absence and has arrested the steady decline in attendance seen over recent years. Much of the work is undertaken by the family support worker, in conjunction with additional office support, and in close liaison with the education welfare officer. Although a more robust line has been taken on authorising absence, levels of unauthorised absence remain high. A few families do not support good attendance and punctuality and, although the school has had some success in improving the attendance of targeted pupils, a small but significant number have had low attendance for the year to date. The headteacher is beginning to make better use of data to analyse attendance patterns, but this analysis is not yet sufficiently rigorous. Too little is done across the school to celebrate and reward good and improving attendance.

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

- work with families of pupils who are frequently absent to improve attendance – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has strengthened. In general, lessons are more sharply focused on what different groups of pupils should achieve because the teachers' ability to pitch work at the right levels is improving. Good relationships and effective behaviour management ensure that work is clearly directed and that time is well used. In the best lessons, teachers are able to sustain a rapid pace. This is made possible by detailed planning and preparation of suitable activities and the skilful management of lessons. In particular, clever questioning is well used to engage all the pupils, to assess their learning, and to promote skills in speaking and listening. Teaching assistants work very effectively in most lessons but in some sessions they are underused.

Although the proportion of good teaching has increased, the school has not achieved its target for 100% satisfactory teaching because a small proportion of lessons remain inadequate. Even in lessons that are satisfactory overall weaknesses remain. When planning lacked clarity or when teachers' explanation was weak, pupils were unsure what they had to do and time was wasted, particularly in plenary sessions at the start or end of lessons.

The most effective teachers make good use of targets and advice to guide pupils and raise their expectations of what they might achieve. However, too often pupils do not know how well they are doing or what they need to do to improve.

The school has responded positively to the findings of the inspection by immediately implementing short term changes to the curriculum, putting in place sensible plans for next year. Time allocations for different subjects have been reviewed and revised and medium and short term planning has been strengthened. Proposed changes

have been agreed for year groupings from September. Teachers have worked hard to widen the range of extra-curricular opportunities for pupils and, as a result, there are now a number of clubs for pupils to join. The curriculum is better balanced and broader and there is greater awareness of the need to enrich and enliven the pupils' learning.

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

- plan the curriculum so that pupils experience a variety of subjects, study relevant and interesting topics and have opportunities to develop their basic skills – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

You and the senior leadership team are improving provision within the school. You have a sound understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Staff morale is high and there is a shared determination to improve provision. Procedures for checking the quality of lessons have been strengthened and this is beginning to have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning. However, until the reorganisation of year groups into classes takes place in September teachers are not able to work together on planning the curriculum. This means that it is difficult to ensure that pupils do not miss aspects of the curriculum or repeat them as they progress through school.

The subject leaders for literacy and numeracy have benefited from the input of LA consultants. They are developing leadership skills and are monitoring and evaluating the work in their subjects. They have taken initiatives that have had a positive impact on the quality of teaching in their subjects. However, they are not yet measuring the impact of these improvements on the rate of progress pupils are making.

Other subject leaders have only had limited opportunities to take a more active role since the last inspection. Consequently, the rate of improvement is much slower in these subjects. However, giving budget responsibilities to leaders and requiring them to prepare action plans means that they are beginning to take a lead in their subjects.

School governors are supportive of the headteacher. However, they are not involved in monitoring the school's effectiveness and, as a result, are not yet able to influence the work of the school or hold it to account for its actions. Governors are aware of this and have embarked on a course of training to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities.

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

- involve subject leaders in taking active roles to improve teaching and the curriculum – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority's statement of action has identified key milestones, resources, and methods of measuring progress for most of the areas for improvement. The school recognises that the support provided by the LA since the last inspection has been good. Advisory staff have helped improve the teachers' practice and the work of subject leaders through additional training. The governing body has acted on advice and training it has received, particularly on how best to undertake its responsibilities. The school improvement partner visits regularly and he has a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The school has benefited from the support of the education welfare officer but the statement of action does not fully address attendance as an area for improvement. The statement of action includes challenging targets against which the school's performance will be measured at the end of Year 6. However, these are unrealistic for 2007.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Quality of local authority's statement of action – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Use assessment information to set pupils targets and give them guidance on how to improve their work.
- Ensure subject leaders in English, mathematics and science take responsibility for analysing and evaluating the progress pupils make in lessons.
- Analyse attendance data more rigorously and raise its profile by celebrating good attendance across the school.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Director of the Children and Young People's Service for Northamptonshire and the Director of Education for the Diocese of Northamptonshire.

Yours sincerely

Tim Bristow
H M Inspector