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Mrs L McLean
The Headteacher
Finedon Mulso Church of England Junior School
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Dear Mrs McLean

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of Finedon Mulso Church of
England Junior School

Introduction

Following my visit with Rajinder Harrison, Additional Inspector, to your school on 27 and 28 June 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in June 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, observed 22 lessons and an assembly, met with the headteacher, staff, groups of pupils and parents, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Shortly after the last monitoring visit in February, a Year 3/4 teacher who was the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) went on maternity leave. The school has acquired cover for the SENCo role through a regular and long serving supply teacher. Two other members of teaching staff are currently on long term sick leave. The school believes they will return to the school in September. Teaching gaps this term have been filled by two long term supply teachers job sharing with two

teachers seconded from another local primary school. A Year 5/6 teacher is leaving the school at the end of this term. The school has been unable to find a suitable replacement but the LA is assisting with this.

Achievement and standards

Standards overall remain below average and pupils continue to make too little progress. The early signs of improvement in progress seen at the last inspection have not been sustained. The school has not managed to raise achievement or significantly improve the learning across any year group. This has been affected by the inconsistencies in teaching. Of particular concern are the lack of progress in Years 3 and 5 and the overall lack of progress in mathematics across the whole school. The improvement in pupils' performance in Year 4 is more secure with around two thirds of pupils improving in reading and mathematics. The school has endeavoured to identify reasons for the differences in progress.

Achievement is marginally stronger in Years 5 and 6, although even here progress is uneven with Year 6 pupils making better progress than those in Year 5. The school has identified that inconsistent teaching in previous years has resulted in a legacy of underachievement in Year 5. There remains a significant variation in the proportion of pupils improving their performance in reading. The exception is where pupils have been provided with individual support through specially chosen intervention programmes when all are seen to make significant steps forward in their reading scores. School data shows that overall pupils attain broadly average standards in reading, but many pupils do not apply appropriate word building strategies to read fluently and accurately either from books or their own written work. The speaking skills of many pupils are also under developed, which also hinders the quality of their written work where the range of vocabulary used is often very limited.

Scrutiny of work in books confirms that standards in writing are still below what is expected for pupils' ages. The school does not maximise opportunities for writing across the curriculum nor reinforce basic skills consistently in all lessons. Pupils' performance remains constrained by weak basic skills and the strategies to improve these have had too little impact. Where good writing was seen, for example accounts of the pupils' residential visit, the work produced was lively and vibrant because pupils had enjoyed the experience and knew what they were trying to convey in order to hold the readers' attention. Too often, pupils are set tasks in writing that they are not wholly confident or interested in and this hinders their progress. When the school has specifically promoted handwriting, presentation and style have improved. However, this has not been consistently reinforced in other subject areas and in all classes, so standards falter. Pupils lack pride in their work and staff expectations remain too variable.

Standards in science remain broadly average and achievement is satisfactory. However, pupils' progress is no better than this because of the quality of the curriculum and the work not being sufficiently engaging throughout the year. Pupils

enjoy the practical nature of the subject and learn more effectively when they 'learn through doing'. However, pupils are not allowed sufficient opportunity to think and apply their knowledge and understanding. Too often teachers tell pupils what they should know or show them what to do in investigations; this restricts progress, especially that of more able pupils. As in mathematics, when pupils are unsure about why they are learning, their interest wanes and they achieve less well.

Pupils are now clearer of their targets for learning, but these are still not sufficiently tailored to individual needs and have therefore not contributed to raising standards.

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

- raise standards throughout the school in English, mathematics and science and ensure pupils' targets for learning take full account of their prior attainment – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' attitudes remain mostly good and pupils want to learn. Recently, the school has significantly improved the playground and its facilities with a wide range of play equipment for pupils to use at lunch time. This has been a popular move and has improved pupils' behaviour in the playground. The behaviour of the majority of pupils in lessons is usually good. The concentration of many pupils diminishes when work set is not sufficiently engaging and pupils are left listening for too long. Behaviour is usually well managed and the school still uses reasonably effective strategies for dealing with unsatisfactory behaviour. The poor attendance of 10% of pupils is still an issue that hinders their overall progress. The school has worked particularly hard to monitor this closely since the last monitoring visit, provide further incentives for those with poor attendance and provide further support to pupils and families through an education welfare officer. Success has been inconsistent, attendance remains below the national average at close to 93% overall. Punctuality has improved more recently and so more pupils are ready to learn at the start of the school day.

The relationships between staff and pupils are mostly good. Pupils' enjoyment of lessons is still not consistent across the school. The pupils continue to make a positive contribution to the school and wider community. The school council and peer buddies are particularly effective.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning was satisfactory or better in half of the 22 lessons seen; only in one lesson was it good. Teaching was inadequate in half the lessons. These findings are a worsening picture since the last two monitoring visits and are perpetuated by instability of staffing, too much teaching responsibility being given to support staff, teachers' lack of subject knowledge, and poor teaching of basic skills. This view differs from the proportion of good and satisfactory teaching

found in the very recent review by the LA. The school has not yet managed to reach the LA's target of all lessons being at least satisfactory, and a third being good or better. Weaknesses in teaching have not been eradicated as the school has been reliant on a range of temporary staff and agreed practices within lessons have not been consistently adopted. Teachers do not yet sufficiently recognise what features are indicative of good or outstanding lessons and that these need to be consistently employed in order to raise achievement and standards.

Although the quality of teaching and learning remains inadequate, it is slightly better in Years 5 and 6 than in Years 3 and 4. Pupils benefit from presentations on the interactive whiteboards but sometimes they are not used well enough to sustain pupils' interest. Where resources in lessons are not well chosen, pupils find it hard to maintain their concentration, which slows down their progress. Many lessons are reasonably well planned. Lesson objectives are stated clearly, although these are not always sharp enough. The pace in lessons and quality of the activities is too often poor. Teachers do not always explain concepts well, nor consistently and effectively challenge pupils through questioning to gain an awareness of their subject knowledge. The work planned for basic skills lessons is poor and often tedious. Pupils study the same subject matter for too long.

In most lessons teaching assistants are a valuable asset in supporting individual pupils and small groups who need specific help. However, too often these assistants are not used to maximum effect when teachers are leading the presentations or summarising lessons at the end.

Marking is now better at informing pupils of how to improve and is becoming more consistent. Staff have worked hard to ensure that homework is now more relevant to the work going on in the classroom. However, a high proportion of pupils are not completing it which further hinders their progress, for example in reading, spelling and knowledge of mathematical tables. Homework is therefore still not making a valuable contribution to pupils' progress.

The school has addressed the issue of regular assessment of pupils' work in core subjects, although the data does not wholly compare with standards of work seen in books. However, increased data has broadly enabled staff to identify successfully those pupils requiring additional support and when progress is limited in some year groups for some pupils.

Pupils are set by ability in Years 3 and 4 for spellings, core skills in literacy and mathematics. Setting continues in these subjects in Years 5 and 6 and is expanded to include English and science. However, this has failed to have any impact on raising standards and achievement. Many of the higher ability pupils are not sufficiently challenged and the quality of extension work provided is poor. The school, however, provides some good quality targeted support for pupils with learning difficulties.

Although the curriculum meets statutory requirements, it is not sufficiently relevant or motivating, nor well enough constructed, to meet the needs and abilities of all the pupils. Hence, they underachieve. In addition, considerable staffing disruptions in the last year have led to many interruptions in learning and teachers are not vigilant enough in checking that new work accurately builds on what pupils already know and understand. Too often, basic skills in literacy and numeracy are taught in isolation rather than through other subjects. Pupils find these lessons uninspiring and often irrelevant.

The care, guidance and support to help pupils with their learning is continuing to improve, but is not firmly embedded. Since the last monitoring visit, pupils have been given targets in all core subjects, but these are not always closely enough matched to individuals' needs. However, pupils are now remembering their targets more and have something to work towards. Pupils' knowledge of expectations for their work is developing, but the lack of consistency of expectations across the school is evident.

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

- improve the quality of teaching throughout the school, ensuring that all lessons are sufficiently challenging – inadequate
- improve the curriculum so that it provides suitable opportunities for pupils of all abilities in the mixed age classes to make progress in their learning – inadequate.

Leadership and management

The leadership team continues to develop, although currently one of the team is on long term sick leave. The commitment of the team has been positive, but hindered by staffing instability and ineffective monitoring, the school has further receded since the last monitoring visit when some headway was beginning to be made. Some of the decisions taken with regard to the curriculum and the methods of teaching some subjects have been ineffective. Staff have been involved in agreeing criteria for planning, teaching and marking, but not all the necessary actions have been implemented. The school still undertakes regular work scrutiny to check on standards and that work is accurately marked. However, standards and expectations remain inconsistent across the school.

The headteacher has made a mainly accurate evaluation of the school's strengths and weaknesses in the self-evaluation form, but the leadership team have not recognised the weaknesses in teaching and learning that permeate through the school and the capacity to improve remains unproven. Not enough thought has been given to long term or strategic decisions. The school has yet to identify all of the action the school needs to take in order to secure improvement. Some aspects of improvement at the last monitoring visit have not been sustained because of staffing. There is still much work to do in ensuring that teaching standards are consistently high across the school and that progress is at least satisfactory across all groups of pupils. Staff have not seen sufficient best practice to influence their own

teaching. Pupils' progress is too slow and still recedes in some subjects in Years 3 and 4. Monitoring of attendance, punctuality, homework and marking across the school has improved but has yet to have a significant impact.

The governing body continues to take its role seriously and is determined to support the school through this period of difficulty and beyond. Support staff are mostly effectively deployed both in and out of the classrooms, meeting the needs of all pupils including those who require additional support or who have particular difficulties and disabilities. They have made an impact on raising individual reading scores, even though these may still be behind national expectations, but they are not always used to their full capacity in some lessons.

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

- ensure that the leadership and management adopt more rigorous approaches to the way that they monitor and evaluate the quality of the school's work – inadequate.

External support

The local authority support has been sustained since the last visit. This has helped the school to keep focused on key areas for improvement. The school continues to receive support from a mentor headteacher, LA advisors and a number of education consultants. It is disappointing that, whilst the level of support from the LA has been extensive this year, the sustainable impact of this support remains limited.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

The priorities for further improvement remain as at the original inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the diocese of Peterborough and the Strategic Director for Education Services for Northamptonshire.

Yours sincerely

Jane Melbourne
H M Inspector Education, Learning and Skills