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Miss B Taylor
The Headteacher
Hindley Green St John's Junior and Infant School
Atherton Road
Hindley Green
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Dear Miss Taylor

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of Hindley Green St John's Junior and Infant School

Introduction

Following my visit with Mr R Bulman, Additional Inspector, to your school on 4 and 5 July 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 January 2007.

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 work from pupils in all year groups, met with the headteacher, the leaders for mathematics, science and assessment, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The LA has decided not to close St John's because there is high demand for school places in the area. It also decided it was not necessary to appoint additional governors. Senior leaders, advanced skills teachers, and leading teachers from two

other primary schools in the LA are working with staff at St John's to improve the quality of provision.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement is patchy. The school's data from the summer term show that a small proportion has done well and others have stood still or made slow progress. Too many pupils have fallen short of their targets, most often in writing but also in reading and mathematics. Inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning are hindering the acceleration of pupils' progress.

Standards vary across year groups and subjects. While broadly average in Year 6, they are below average at the end of Year 2. Compared with 2006, there has been an improvement in the school's results in the 2007 national tests for 11-year-olds in mathematics and science. Even so, the school has not met all of its targets. The validated assessments of Year 2 pupils' performance in reading, writing and mathematics are lower than in 2006. Few pupils have done well for their age. Writing is a particular concern: less than half of the year group is entering Year 3 at the level expected of seven-year-olds. The picture of a high proportion of pupils struggling with writing is also typical of older year groups. Pupils know how to structure their writing but it lacks richness of vocabulary and accuracy in spelling and punctuation. The work in pupils' books shows that handwriting styles vary widely and presentation is often poor. Reading competence also varies; not enough pupils are reaching the level expected for their age and too few read really well. Underachievement in reading and writing is placing pupils at a disadvantage across the curriculum.

There are elements of promise in the achievement of the younger pupils, particularly in mathematics. The Reception year pupils have moved on; they have made a start in reading and are willing to write and to solve simple number problems. Similarly, pupils in Year 1 easily explained how they worked out the change they would get when buying items from the class shop. The use of different strategies was not always evident in the work of older pupils, who were more tentative in handling number. The more able pupils are not being challenged enough.

In science, standards vary but there are signs of accelerating progress especially in the development of pupils' skills in carrying out investigations. Pupils are learning to record their findings using tables and diagrams, and are starting to evaluate their predictions and to draw conclusions. All the Year 2 pupils have attained the level expected for their age, as have nearly all the Year 6 pupils. Nevertheless, there is much scope to challenge the pupils further, especially the more able younger pupils.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2007:

- Raise standards and achievement throughout the school, especially in science and mathematics – inadequate progress

Personal development and well-being

The school has acted on the pupils' views and taken good steps to widen the activities for them when in the playground. Zoned areas, play equipment and increased interaction between adults and pupils have made time outdoors more productive, enjoyable and less fraught for pupils. The school council helped to draw up the policy on how to deal with incidents of bullying and led presentations to pupils and parents. Attendance remains good and pupils are willing learners who concentrate well when their interest is caught. In an assembly, there was rapt attention from pupils and parents alike as Year 1 pupils presented a slide show and talked enthusiastically about the artist Andy Goldsworthy's use of natural elements. In lessons, however, there were incidents of unacceptable behaviour and sanctions were applied. While many pupils accept a lull in pace, others are quick to fidget. A common problem is the way pupils ignore and defy instructions from adults to stop what they are doing or to tidy away. Relatively few pupils take true pride in what they do or act on the teachers' comments on their last piece of work.

Quality of provision

The variability in the quality of teaching lies at the heart of the pupils' underachievement. There is not enough strong, effective teaching to push on the pupils' learning, which is too often inconsequential. This is because the challenge for pupils is too low, the pace of lessons too slow, teachers' explanations too sketchy to ensure pupils know exactly what they must do to produce good work, and pupils are not helped to realise what they have learnt and how it helps them meet their targets. Time was frittered away and learning was interrupted when pupils had to find what they needed or had to wait until others were out of the way. Teachers missed opportunities to model the process involved in writing and in solving problems and to ask the pupils to explain and show how they arrived at an answer. There were also occasional errors in teachers' subject knowledge.

Where there has been improvement is in the closer focus on what different groups of pupils need to learn, as well as the targeted work of the learning support assistants and the wider range of activities to promote learning. Teachers have a clear overview of where their pupils are at and their targets. They have been diligent in planning lessons, preparing activities and sharing information with the support assistants. Pupils enjoyed playing games, such as using cards to make compound words, or working with a partner to solve number problems and then show the answer using a number fan. Learning assistants quietly prompted, guided and encouraged pupils and ensured those with learning and personal needs played a full part in the lesson. They are showing a good level of insight in their observations of pupils' responses and progress.

In different classes, there are elements of effective practice but the school lacks uniformity and consistency of expectation and provision. Several teachers are skilful

in how they draw out pupils' explanations of their thinking in mathematics. Some are starting to exploit the potential of the interactive whiteboards. There are good examples of displays to support pupils' learning and to remind them of key vocabulary and targets. Similarly, there are effective routines that enable pupils to organise themselves and to make the most of work time.

One area for attention is the teachers' marking of the pupils' work. Not all adults are following the agreed policy or the agreed handwriting model. Pupils are often reprimanded rather than encouraged and, in some cases, there is no comment either on how well the success criteria have been met or what pupils need to do to improve their work. This is particularly evident in mathematics. In science, inaccurate work has been accepted.

The school has adopted the practice of a partner school in linking foundation subjects and using a theme as a context for learning, with a focus on developing key skills. This has worked better in some classes than in others; the quantity, depth and quality of content have been very variable especially in science. The school is rightly reviewing the curriculum for the next school year.

Productive steps have been taken to increase parents' involvement. Sixteen parents attended the first meeting of the parents' forum where homework was discussed. Questionnaires have been sent asking for parents' views about aspects of the school's performance and events have been organised to keep parents informed about their children's progress and what is happening in school.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2007:

- Improve the quality of teaching so that all pupils learn as well as they should, particularly by raising teachers' expectations of what pupils should achieve and using teaching assistants more effectively – satisfactory progress
- Provide pupils with a curriculum that fully meets their academic needs – satisfactory progress
- Involve parents as fully as possible in supporting their children's learning - satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

After a slow start, the pace of action has increased and morale is on the up. The staff are understandably jaded after a busy period of support and guidance from different sources on differing fronts. Unfortunately, systems, policies and practices have not all been sustained when new initiatives came on stream and this has resulted in inconsistencies and missed targets. The school is right to take stock and to review its priorities to ensure concerted effort and success in establishing 'the St John's way'. It has started to collate and analyse information on pupils' performance and the quality of provision which is necessary to ensure that the school gets off to a firm start in the autumn term, with clearly identified courses of action.

The school has followed its detailed plan of action and drawn on the guidance and support from the two partner schools and LA personnel. Many of the success criteria, however, lack specificity making it difficult for governors and senior leaders to gauge the impact of action. Members of the monitoring committee, which includes governors, have shown high commitment in meeting every two weeks to review progress. Minutes show a good level of critical questioning. The presentation from the inclusion manager on her work to realign provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities sets a good precedent in its quality of content.

The reorganisation of responsibilities has placed the leadership of English, mathematics, science and assessment within the senior management team. These managers are gradually gaining an informed view of standards and achievement in their subjects and have benefited from meeting with leaders from the partner schools to decide how to develop the quality of provision. Individual accountabilities remain unclear, especially in monitoring the school's progress. Although some monitoring of teachers' planning and pupils' work has been carried out, there is no agreed cycle to track how well policies and practices are being implemented and how well staff are acting on advice and points for improvement.

The shift in emphasis to the pupils' learning is appropriate. The headteacher's judgements on the quality of learning and its links to teaching are well founded and in her summary for HMI she correctly identified the main areas of inconsistency in the provision overall. She and the governing body have made the prudent decision to appoint an additional experienced teacher from September to ensure continuity for pupils when the normal teacher is out of class. The school now has reliable data in reading, writing and mathematics, and a useful system to track pupils' performance over the year. However, the current focus is on how well pupils are doing in relation to what is expected for their age, and not whether they have made enough progress or not. As a result, the school is not best placed to differentiate between pupils who are actually achieving well from those who are coasting and then to adjust targets and to plan support accordingly.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in January 2007:

- Improve monitoring and evaluation and the use of assessment data to accelerate achievement – satisfactory progress

External support

The LA has followed its statement of action, with a focus on intensive initial support. As intended, the partnership with two schools has been productive in heightening St John's staff awareness of effective practice and systems to support assessment, provision for pupils with special needs, and also strategic planning. Advanced skills teachers and leading subject teachers have invested significant time and effort in observing, supporting, guiding and coaching different members of staff at St John's.

However, the impact of this has not always been as positive as intended and the interlinking of actions has not always been effective. The recent change in allocated school adviser has meant he has had little involvement in monitoring the school's progress, but the comprehensive evaluation by the LA in June gave clear judgements on whether exit criteria had been met or not. Although the exit criteria do not all match the success criteria in the statement of action, they follow from the content. A strength of the evaluation report was the listing of priorities in each of the subsections to guide the headteacher in meeting the criteria.

The LA took prompt action to follow up pupils' concerns about bullying raised in the January inspection. As a result, there were positive changes in practice.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- The pupils' learning and the identification of aspects in the teaching that promote or impede it.
- Pupils' writing and reading skills.
- Teachers' skills in questioning pupils, especially to enable them to explain their thinking and the strategies they have used.
- The analysis of data to identify underachievement.
- The consistency in the teachers' use of the marking policy.

These priorities will form the focus of the next monitoring inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the diocese and the Director of Children and Young People's Services in Wigan.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Sonja Øyen
Her Majesty's Inspector