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3 December 2007

The Headteacher
Spring Common School
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Dear Ms Taylor

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF SPRING COMMON SCHOOL

Following my visit with Karin Heap, Alan Lemon and Martyn Groucutt, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 13 and 14 November 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in November 2006. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory progress

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good progress

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed only after consultation with HMI

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report 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

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF SPRING COMMON SCHOOL

Report from the second monitoring inspection: 13 and 14 November 2007

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the three assistant headteachers, the associate deputy headteacher, three subject leaders, three governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection classes have been reorganised so that pupils are taught in groups with other pupils of a similar age. Both the upper and lower school buildings now include additional resource bases designed for small group work and individual teaching of pupils with specific needs, such as autism and profound multiple learning difficulties. This represents a significant change from the way in which the school was previously organised.

Achievement and standards

The school's improved information about the progress which pupils are making in literacy, numeracy, science, information communication technology (ICT) and personal, social and health education (PSHE) continues to indicate that pupils' overall progress is too inconsistent. Outcomes at the end of Key Stages 2 and 3, in 2007, were much lower than the school's targets. Outcomes at the end of Key Stage 4 were more positive but still missed the school's targets. There are, however, indications of some better progress between July and November for pupils in all key stages, particularly in literacy.

Specific approaches to teaching pupils with autism are being implemented across the school, often with notable success. This is helping these pupils overcome the barriers to learning which they experience. Behaviours that disrupt their learning are being managed effectively and pupils are accepting routines and expectations that are positively assisting them to make progress. A substantial amount of training in using symbols and signing is promoting pupils' communication skills and together with the improved learning habits they have acquired this is assisting nearly all these pupils to make sound progress in many areas of the curriculum. A few pupils, who are severely autistic, are making substantial progress in being settled and co-operative.

In the lessons observed during the monitoring visit, pupils generally made satisfactory progress. In the best lessons, progress was good because teaching and support met their needs well. Pupils, including autistic pupils, were observed making the best progress when the staff were persistent in including them in the lessons and where they were given well-structured tasks and support to complete them. Where pupils were allowed to opt out of an activity their progress was minimal.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour continues to be good overall. A minority, because of their learning difficulties, have considerable problems in staying calm, however, they generally manage to do so because the school has established clear expectations for all pupils' conduct and staff training in behaviour management has had a positive effect. In lessons, pupils cooperate willingly and at play times they act safely. Occasionally, a few pupils, who could behave better, act unexpectedly, for example, not sitting when necessary or interrupting the teacher. This is a reflection of a degree of inconsistency by some staff in upholding the school's high expectations.

The school environment has again improved. In corridors in particular, there are bright displays of pupils' work and activities which are clearly labelled with signs as well as writing. This celebrates pupils' achievements and includes different groups of learners. The school has extended its range of enrichment activities at lunchtimes, for example pupils talked animatedly about their running club and the competitions they attended to represent the school. Displays around the school show pupils participating in a number of exciting extra-curricular activities.

Communication between home and school has improved, which is helping parents to be more informed about their children's provision and well-being. Pupils responded positively to a consultation leading to a range of constructive action points to improve aspects of health, well-being and preparation for the future. Pupils generally enjoy their learning. In good lessons they are encouraged to help each other, to make choices and take turns.

The provision of multi-agency support, for example, educational psychology, has improved because the LA has purchased additional support and the school has appointed two Higher Level teaching assistants trained to work with pupils with speech and language difficulties to work alongside the therapist. However, specialist services are not yet frequent enough to be sufficiently responsive to the needs of all pupils.

Quality of provision

The organisation of provision has improved significantly. Pupils are now placed in groups with those of a similar age, where they can mix with their peer group. Importantly, pupils with the most complex needs also have individual programmes, which involve one-to-one teaching, physiotherapy, sensory work or other suitable interventions.

The quality of the teaching observed was satisfactory overall, ranging from inadequate to outstanding. In all lessons, pupils and staff had very positive relationships. Where teaching was good or better, all staff were clear about their roles and were deployed and managed well by the teacher. For example, in an English lesson the most able pupils were working with the teacher on whole sentence construction, while others were working on individual word recognition with effective support from the teaching assistant. Teachers used the much greater range of data on pupil performance alongside their own continuous assessments to ensure

tasks were well matched to pupils' needs and each pupil was challenged to maximise their potential. Pace was good and expectations were high throughout. Effective lessons used a range of teaching techniques to address different learning needs. In one group, for example, the higher level teaching assistant who was leading the class was persistent in getting pupils with very limited or no speech to use signing so that they participated effectively in the lesson. The outstanding lessons were characterised by the teachers' exceptional knowledge of the pupils' needs, which they had used to plan meticulously, by their very high expectations, and by the way in which each adult in the class was thoroughly focused on ensuring that pupils were making progress.

In the inadequate and the weaker satisfactory lessons, teaching assistants were not well enough deployed, leading to some pupils making inadequate progress. Tasks lacked challenge, and were sometimes unnecessarily repetitive in nature, so failed to meet the needs of pupils.

The quality of planning continues to improve. Planning is being monitored regularly by the headteacher and senior staff, and the template that is now in common use means that all teachers are producing plans in a similar format. Many teachers are showing greater skill and confidence in using the data on individual pupils' progress to inform their teaching. The best planning identifies the desired outcomes for each pupil, setting out a clear range of activities to enable pupils to achieve their targets. The leadership team is aware that the main challenge now is to support some teachers in setting suitably focused learning objectives and to translate these into activities that will enable desired outcomes to be achieved for different groups of learners. Weaker planning still does not establish clear roles and responsibilities for all the adults who are working with the class.

The numeracy and literacy leaders are working very hard to improve teaching and learning. In numeracy, the need for teachers and teaching assistants to work together effectively has been identified as an area for development and this is currently being undertaken up to the end of Key Stage 4. Resources have been developed so that they are now appropriate for each individual class. The governing body has approved a new numeracy policy, which includes clear expectations for assessment, planning and objective setting and this is becoming embedded in daily practice. Planning and work undertaken in classes is monitored with care by the numeracy leader and this is beginning to be effective in improving practice. There has been an improvement in the use of software programs and staff have been supported in maximising their use of information and communication technology (ICT). The quality of displays about numeracy has improved; much of these are now interactive and therefore more of a stimulus for the pupils. The resource room is being used more effectively as teachers seek to improve their skills and classroom practice.

The literacy leader has sensibly focused on the crucial area of resources, particularly in the upper school. The library is being remodelled and individual class resource boxes and teachers' long term objectives are supported by a range of materials. The linking of planning and resources has been a major focus that has been very successful.

Importantly, effective lesson delivery is being modelled by the two subject leaders, after which teachers have an opportunity to work on medium term planning with support. Through this method, effective objective setting, coupled with the development of long- and medium-term planning, is being improved. The ways in which objectives can be broken into activities has been accurately identified as a training need, as has the need to promote the effective teaching of phonics. Resources are being carefully put together to support this next step so that learning can be maximised.

Regular assessment points have been established which are helping to build up a more accurate picture of the progress pupils are making over time. Suitable moderation of pupils' levels of attainment in literacy has taken place and the school is now confident that these are accurate. Numeracy assessment is at an earlier stage of development but is nevertheless much improved. Literacy and numeracy targets have been set for each pupil based on their prior attainment. Again, these are at an early stage of development and have yet to be moderated by the headteacher. However, once moderated to ensure that they are suitably aspirational, the combination of these targets with regular assessments of pupils' progress towards them makes the school well placed to notice quickly any underachievement in these subjects and take swift action to remedy it.

Much initiative has been shown by the headteacher and senior leaders in improving provision for managing behaviour and meeting the needs of pupils with autism. The school has provided a substantial amount of training to staff that is equipping them well to manage pupils' behaviour and autism, and further training is programmed. This has begun to have a positive impact on developing staff's expertise. Behaviour management has improved; although there is some inconsistency in the way expectations for good behaviour are exerted. The approaches planned to support pupils with autism to engage in learning are becoming more focused. Training to date has enabled many teachers and assistants to prepare appropriate methods and resources, which help to overcome barriers to learning. Not all staff have undertaken this training, the final part of which is imminent. Re-organisation of classrooms, clearly defined work routines, visual reinforcement in lessons and use of signing and symbols are often combined to make learning effective. In particular, the training and development work to improve pupils' communication methods with the introduction of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and Makaton signing is starting to have a positive effect on how teaching promotes effective communication. The school's monitoring of the impact of these improvements is limited. Leaders of these areas are aware there are inconsistencies in practice, but are not yet checking rigorously how successfully new approaches are being adopted across the school in order to be able to support staff or to tackle robustly any issues.

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
- Improve the quality of teaching and ensure effective assessment so that all pupils can make the best possible progress – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The headteacher has continued her determined drive to improve the quality of education at Spring Common, to good effect. Potentially controversial decisions, such as the reorganisation of classes, have been carefully managed with the needs of the pupils taking priority. The headteacher has invested significant time in trying to alleviate parents' and staff's concerns about this reorganisation. As a result, parents' views of the school are now more favourable than they have been in the recent past, pupils are settled in age-appropriate classes, and staff are clear about their responsibilities. Careful attention has been paid to balancing inclusion with pupils' individual needs. For example, pupils with profound multiple learning difficulties now benefit from being taught with others of their age, while still receiving specialist attention, such as physiotherapy and massage in dedicated resource bases. Importantly, the new staffing structure has enabled specific roles to be allocated to teachers and to teaching assistants, and staff are receiving appropriate training to develop their skills.

The capacity of the leadership team has been improved by the addition of new appointments and by well planned training. Roles and responsibilities are clear and are closely aligned to the school's priorities. Leaders are working hard to support staff and to develop their area of responsibility and this is increasingly effective. Sensibly, the headteacher has worked with the new team to develop their understanding of the process of managing change. The leadership team has been involved in some initial monitoring of their areas of responsibility but this has largely been informal. The leaders of literacy and numeracy are working effectively to improve provision. A carefully planned programme of support for teachers includes joint planning and team teaching. Subject leaders have been appointed for all other subjects and for key areas of the school's work such as communication.

Monitoring and evaluation are variable. Lesson observations, which have been carried out by the headteacher, are appropriately detailed and provide a clear picture of staff's individual strengths and areas for development. Detailed, helpful feedback has been given to subject leaders about aspects which are strong and those which need further attention. Literacy and numeracy leaders have begun to be involved in effective monitoring. Formal monitoring and evaluation of other aspects of the school's work have yet to be developed.

Overall, the pace of change since the previous monitoring inspection has been swift and many appropriate actions have been taken. The headteacher has rightly identified that these now need to become fully embedded and consistent in order for them to have the intended impact.

The governing body is well organised and is fully committed to ensuring that the school continues to improve. They have been highly supportive of the changes which the headteacher has made, while providing an appropriate level of challenge. Good links have been made with members of staff who hold key posts, such as the literacy and numeracy leaders, and governors are thoroughly involved in the broader life of the school.

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
- Refine leadership and management roles so that there are clear lines of accountability to ensure policy is consistently implemented – good

External support

The LA's support for the school is much improved. Good quality support and challenge has been provided by the School Improvement Partner (SIP), and the LA has purchased additional time to ensure that this is sufficiently regular. Support from the literacy and numeracy consultants has been particularly effective in helping the leaders to develop their confidence and competence in their roles, which is having an increasing impact on practice. The LA has recently helped the school to secure a part time associate deputy headteacher who has experience in a school in special measures, and is jointly funding this support. The LA is aware that the school finds its allocation of multi-agency support inadequate to meet its needs and this is due to be reviewed by the LA's implementation group.

Priorities for further improvement

- Monitor rigorously staff's understanding and implementation of the school's new expectations and procedures in order to be able to provide challenge and tailored support when necessary
- Ensure that teaching assistants are effectively deployed in each lesson so that all pupils are making progress