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11 December 2007

Mrs J Betts
The Headteacher
Squirrel Hayes First School
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ST8 7DF

Dear Mrs Betts

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF SQUIRREL HAYES FIRST SCHOOL

Following my visit with Clive Lewis, Additional Inspector, to your school on 4 and 5 December 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 since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report 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.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director of Children and Lifelong Learning for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Watters
Her Majesty's Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF SQUIRREL HAYES FIRST SCHOOL

Report from the second monitoring inspection: 4 and 5 December 2007

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, assistant headteacher, the literacy and numeracy coordinators, the special educational needs coordinator, chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the previous inspection, one teacher has left the school and two other teachers have been recruited to teach in the Foundation Stage. One of these teachers is absent on long term sick leave. Four teaching assistants have also been recruited. At the end of the autumn term 2007 the headteacher is retiring and the Year 3 teacher is leaving. The governors have been successful in recruiting a new headteacher and a teacher for the Year 3 class. Both are expected to join the school on 1 January 2008.

Achievement and standards

The results of the 2007 national tests for seven year olds show that standards are rising but remain significantly below the national and LA average. Standards in reading are moving closer to the national average than in writing, where attainment in handwriting and presentation is unsatisfactory. Over a four year period standards in mathematics have shown very little sign of improvement and the gap between what the pupils are expected to achieve for their age and what they are currently attaining is still far too wide. The girls continue to do much better than boys, particularly in writing and mathematics.

The school's assessment of pupils' achievement in Years 1, 2 and 3, carried out in July 2007, shows that rates of progress increased from the previous year, particularly in reading and mathematics, where achievement was satisfactory. Progress in writing however was much slower and unsatisfactory. From the end of their time in Year 2, the Year 4 pupils who left the school in July made satisfactory progress in writing and reading but unsatisfactory progress in mathematics. A scrutiny of the pupils' writing books, from Year 1 to Year 4, shows that the current rate of progress in writing is generally satisfactory. Whilst pupils' achievement is clearly improving, progress overall is too variable, particularly in writing and mathematics, and there are still too many pupils, almost 40%, who are not achieving as well as they might. The school recognises this and has made raising achievement in writing and mathematics a key priority.

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

- raise standards and increase rates of pupils' progress – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils are very well behaved and have positive attitudes. Pupils in Year 4 are very mature and sensible, welcoming visitors with courtesy and good humour. Many are keen to talk about their work and are quick to engage in conversation about their lives and their school. Relationships between adults and pupils are very positive.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has improved, ranging from good to inadequate, and is generally satisfactory. There are, however, still too many lessons that are fragile and unsatisfactory and too few consistently good lessons.

Teachers' planning in literacy and numeracy has improved. Learning objectives and success criteria are used satisfactorily to guide the pupils' learning experiences. Activities for different ability groups are planned for, although these are not always translated into tasks which match the pupils' different learning needs. In the best lessons, pupils make good progress acquiring new skills and knowledge because they are challenged and supported well by teachers and teaching assistants. In weaker lessons, pupils make very slow progress because they do not understand what they have to do and their work is either too easy or too difficult. Since the previous monitoring inspection, there has been a more consistent focus on teaching important new skills and knowledge and this has made a positive impact on increasing progress in writing. For example, the increased opportunities for pupils to write at length are helping them become more confident writers.

The curriculum has recently been reviewed. This is timely as the school recognises that further work is required to improve the quality of curriculum planning, particularly in the foundation subjects, and to ensure that raising achievement in reading, writing and mathematics is given a higher priority in other subjects. The school is also aware that time is not used as effectively to raise achievement in the afternoon sessions as in the morning.

The quality of teachers' marking in writing has improved considerably since the previous inspection. Helpful and constructive comments written in pupils' books provide clear guidance about what the pupils need to do to improve their work. Pupils are given time each day to reflect on the teachers' comments and to make sure that common errors are not repeated. Most pupils know their targets for improvement in literacy and talk confidently about how they are working hard to achieve them.

The provision for pupils who have learning difficulties and disabilities is led and managed well by the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO). The pupils who are on the school's register of special educational needs make good progress and nearly half have made better than average progress since September. Following the introduction of a new support strategy, provided by teaching assistants and the SENCO, at the beginning of the autumn term 2007, the pupils are clearly benefiting from better quality targeted intervention and the more precise direct teaching of new skills.

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

- improve the quality of teaching so that all pupils are suitably challenged and their differing needs are met – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

Significant improvements have been made in monitoring and evaluating the school's performance and the quality of education. The headteacher has introduced a more systematic programme to monitor the quality of teaching and learning, which includes observing lessons and checking teachers' planning and the pupils' written work. Subject leaders are also involved in this process and provide satisfactory support to the school's senior leadership. Whilst the arrangements for monitoring teaching are clearly improving, the written feedback to teachers is not rigorous enough. Weaknesses identified at the last monitoring inspection have not been sufficiently addressed, for example there is still too little focus on evaluating teachers' work in lessons in relation to how well the pupils have achieved.

The assistant headteacher has improved the systems for analysing assessment information to ensure that pupils' progress and their achievements are tracked more rigorously and consistently than previously. This provides a secure foundation for further improvement and already the school is in a far better position to identify levels of underachievement and then target resources to tackle weaknesses.

Strategic planning is satisfactory. The school development plan provides a sound framework for further improvement. Whilst the school's self evaluation is generally realistic, there are examples of judgements not matching the evidence, for example the school says that standards are satisfactory when they are inadequate. Nevertheless, improvements have been made and the headteacher, governors and staff have ensured that the school is in a more secure position than at the time of the last monitoring inspection.

The role of the governors in holding the school to account for the pupils' achievements continues to improve well. Minutes of governors' meetings reflect a good level of challenge and support. Governors' questions and comments are particularly searching and leave no room for complacency, for example, 'what do we need to do to resolve the problem (of low attainment) in Years 3 and 4?', and in relation to improving leadership and management, 'we need to be monitoring (progress) every half term, now, not every term...so that we can resolve issues quickly.'

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

- more rigorously evaluate and monitor the school's work to bring about rapid improvement – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority has provided a good level of support since May 2007 and this is having a positive impact on improving the quality of education. The school's link

inspector arranged for a mentor headteacher to work at the school and support the headteacher and senior teachers. This helped improve the quality of leadership and management. Literacy and numeracy consultants continue to provide a satisfactory range of help, particularly to improve the quality of teaching and moderate teachers' assessments. The LA continues to monitor the school's performance at regular and frequent intervals and provides useful advice to guide the school's improvement, although written feedback to teachers does not focus sufficiently on the impact of teaching on the pupils' progress in lessons.

Priorities for further improvement

- As a matter of urgency, raise attainment in mathematics and boys' achievement in literacy and numeracy.
- Ensure that raising achievement in writing and mathematics is given a higher priority in other subjects and in the afternoon curriculum.