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4 October 2007

Ms K Chapman
The Acting Headteacher
Acorns Primary School
School Close
Long Compton
Shipston-on-Stour
Warwickshire
CV36 5LA

Dear Ms Chapman

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ACORNS PRIMARY SCHOOL

Following my visit with Rob Hubbleday HMI to your school on Tuesday 25 September 2007 and my visit on Wednesday 26 September 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 February 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

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 and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's services for Warwickshire.

Yours sincerely

Ken Buxton
H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF ACORNS PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 25 and 26 September 2007

Evidence

The inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the acting headteacher, the Foundation Stage manager, the chair of governors, the school council, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since becoming subject to special measures the school has experienced an exceptionally turbulent period of staffing. An acting deputy headteacher was seconded to the school in June 2007 to work with, and to support, the headteacher. The headteacher has subsequently been on long term absence and, in her absence, the acting deputy headteacher has taken on the role of acting headteacher. In addition, one of the school's permanent teachers has been seconded to another school in the authority and the other permanent teacher is also on long term absence. To manage this situation the school has appointed a supply teacher on a temporary basis, increased the teaching commitment of a part time teacher, and made use of an additional supply teacher on a part time basis.

The Key Stage 2 classes have been merged so that all the Key Stage 2 pupils are now taught as one class. There are no Year 2 pupils so the small group of Year 1 pupils are taught separately in the mornings and then work with the Reception children each afternoon.

The acting headteacher has taken on the coordination of special educational needs, mathematics and information and communication technology (ICT). The Foundation Stage manager is taking on temporarily the role of literacy coordinator. The science coordinator is currently absent but intending to return before the Autumn half-term holiday.

In July 2007 the school was flooded following torrential rainfall in the area and, as a result, considerable damage to the property and resources occurred. Following a huge effort from all concerned to repair the damage, the school opened for the start of the autumn term 2007.

Achievement and standards

Children's attainment at the start of the Reception Year is at least average and sometimes better than this. At the end of the Foundation Stage most pupils achieve at least average standards and, as a result, are prepared well for the start of Key Stage 1.

The unvalidated results of the 2007 assessments at Key Stage 1 show that standards were above the average particularly in reading with all pupils achieving Level 3. Similarly, all the pupils exceeded the level expected for mathematics and all achieved the standard expected for writing. Despite these good results, it is not possible to determine whether this group of pupils made more than satisfactory progress. This is because the school's Foundation Stage data for this year group was still in the early stages of being introduced and is not secure enough to make accurate and considered comparisons.

At Key Stage 2, the unvalidated results from the most recent tests in 2007 show some variation in the standards pupils attain. Standards in English and science are broadly similar to national figures, but the mathematics results are below average. Standards in mathematics at Key Stage 2 in the 2006 assessments were also significantly lower than those achieved in English. This variable picture is reinforced by the school's record system which shows that some Key Stage 2 pupils are not making the progress expected over time. Similarly, pupils are not making sufficient progress in some lessons which explains why progress across Key Stage 2 remains inadequate.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2007:

- improve achievement in Year 3 to 6 particularly in mathematics and science, by raising teachers' expectations, making lessons more interesting and improving pupils' confidence in their own abilities – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour continues to be good around the school and in lessons. Pupils work and play together well. Their attitudes to learning are good and they are keen to do well. They enjoy school and describe how things have improved since the last inspection. They say that lessons are more interesting and work is more challenging.

Attendance, at best, is only just satisfactory when compared to the national figures. The school has not met its annual attendance target and, as a result, the LA requires it to establish an attendance action plan for the current academic year.

The school council represents the school well, although the pupil members are keen to establish a more regular programme of meetings in which they can influence and determine aspects of the school's future.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning in the Foundation Stage continues to be at least satisfactory with a number of good features. In Key Stages 1 and 2 most of the observed lessons were satisfactory but some were inadequate and the inspectors agree with the school's view that the overall quality is currently inadequate. This is because teachers are adjusting to the new organisational structure and having to learn how to plan for the wide age range and ability spread as well as meet pupils' individual needs. In addition, teachers are not always aware of when they will be working with teaching assistants and, as a result, do not make best use of them to support and guide pupils' learning. Similarly, teachers' lesson planning does not take

sufficient account of assessment data and, as a consequence, is not always focused sharply enough on what the pupils will learn. Organisational matters sometimes contribute to the problem. For example, some pupils at Key Stage 2 learning to play musical instruments with peripatetic teachers missed important sections of their mathematics lessons. The pupils concerned explained how this made the mathematics lesson more difficult.

The provision for pupils with learning difficulties is generally appropriate and most pupils make at least satisfactory progress in mathematics and reading. They are not making the progress expected in writing and, as a consequence, the standards they achieve are unsatisfactory.

In the better quality lessons there was a degree of urgency with teachers using questions to good effect to draw out pupils' understanding. Importantly, teachers take time during these lessons to ensure that the pupils were making the progress planned.

Considerable work has taken place recently analysing pupils' end of year assessments. This analysis has enabled the school to develop the use of personal targets for pupils to achieve. Whilst this work is to be encouraged and continued there has not yet been sufficient time or opportunity to embed this initiative for it to have had a positive impact on raising achievement.

Similarly, the school is developing a marking policy for teachers which is intended to promote greater consistency, across all year groups, in helping pupils understand how they can improve their work and meet their individual targets. Although elements of the policy have been introduced into different classes it has not been universally agreed and accepted. This explains why there are still too many inconsistencies in the overall quality of teachers' marking and why pupils continue to be unsure of how they can improve their work and make better progress.

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

- use accurate assessment to check pupils' progress and identify and address underachievement by ensuring that work set provides all pupils, including the more able, with sufficient challenge – inadequate
- tell pupils clearly what they have to do to improve their work – inadequate.

Leadership and management

The decision to second an acting deputy headteacher to support the headteacher has not turned out as intended. The acting deputy headteacher has found herself in the role of acting headteacher with the responsibility of leading the school out of special measures without, as yet, having her position ratified by the school's governing body. She has made a positive beginning in this role and has managed the school through some demanding and exceptional times, including getting it ready for the autumn term following the damaging floods that occurred at the end of July. The turbulent staffing situation remains a major concern as the acting headteacher is continually having to consider how best to deploy the staff that are available. In addition, the acting headteacher has not had the support of experienced and established colleagues to assist in taking on a challenging leadership role. For

example, the roles of subject leaders are not established and the school does not currently have the capability or capacity to take responsibility for leading the improvement of standards in the core subjects.

The acting headteacher has started to gain an overview of the school's strengths and improvement priorities but, as yet, is too reliant on the LA to carry out regular monitoring in a systematic way. She does not have the necessary expertise or experience to draw upon which would allow her to lead and manage a small primary school, without assistance, through a challenging phase in its development.

The governing body was surprised at the outcome of the inspection and spent time trying to find reasons to explain the school's situation. Their supportive role had not been sufficiently rigorous to hold the school to account and the governors were largely unaware of the school's weaknesses until the school was placed in special measures. As events unfolded, there has been a level of frustration with the LA's procedures to resolve the staffing issues quickly and, as a consequence, two governors have resigned. The LA has provided governor training events which have raised awareness and helped governors to develop a clearer understanding of their specific roles and responsibilities. The governors are now starting to receive regular updates from the acting headteacher which informs them about progress being achieved with the issues identified in the inspection report.

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

- develop leadership and management, including monitoring and evaluation, at all levels so there is a clear basis for planning improvements and reliable strategies for seeing them through – inadequate.

External support

The local authority's statement of action required a number of revisions after it was first submitted to Ofsted. It has since been revised and updated to reflect changes that have occurred at the school and is now judged to be satisfactory, although there is still no description or explanation about the LA's level of awareness of the problems faced by the school prior to the inspection. The current plan, whilst focusing appropriately on the priorities identified in the inspection report, does not set out clearly enough how the LA intends to support, and resolve, the school's long term staffing situation. Nor does it make clear the LA's plans to provide high quality support for the acting headteacher from an experienced mentor which will enable her to gain the necessary expertise to fulfil the role successfully.

The local authority's review and intervention planning meeting has not yet taken place. This considerable delay is a weakness in the LA's strategy to develop a cohesive team that works together well in its drive to remove the school from the category of special measures.

The school's teachers have benefited from having LA consultants working alongside them and there is now a greater understanding and awareness of how data can be analysed to identify focused improvement priorities. Similarly, governors have been supported well by the LA to develop a clearer view of their responsibilities, although

there remains a high level of frustration at the slow progress being made to resolve the school's staffing issues.

Overall, the LA's intervention and support to the school has not enabled it to make the progress expected. Therefore, the quality and impact of the external support is inadequate.

Priorities for further improvement

- Begin to develop the school's own improvement plan so that the school can start to create the capacity to secure the necessary improvement.
- Provide high quality support for the acting headteacher.
- Develop the role of the subject coordinators