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11 July 2007

Mrs Gina Brierley
Acting Headteacher
St Thomas's CE Primary School
Kendal Green
Kendal
Cumbria
LA9 5PP

Dear Mrs Brierley

Special Measures: Monitoring Inspection of St Thomas's CE Primary School

Introduction

Following my visit with David Byrne, Additional Inspector, to your school on 9 and 10 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 March 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 met with the acting headteacher, the new substantive headteacher, the deputy headteacher, leaders of English, mathematics and science, the co-ordinator for special educational needs, groups of pupils, the chair and vice-chair of governors and one other governor, and three representatives from the local authority.

Context

The substantive headteacher, at the time of the inspection in March, left the school at the end of March. The local authority arranged for an experienced headteacher to lead the school for the summer term, working two and half days per week in the school. The governing body has appointed an experienced headteacher to take up the post from September 2007.

Three teachers have resigned and leave the school at the end of this term. One teacher has been absent for some time and another is on leave. One of these classes is being taught by a temporary teacher. The other is being taught by a part-time teacher already on the staff.

The local authority has no plans to close the school or to appoint additional governors. It had identified the school as a cause for concern before the inspection in March 2007 and initiated a programme of support, monitoring and intervention at an enhanced level.

Achievement and standards

Standards are rising and, as a result of the particular focus in Years 2 and 6 of actions to raise standards, the provisional results in the 2007 national tests for pupils in these year groups show an improvement on the previous year. Reading has improved but standards in writing remain a weakness, particularly for boys. Standards in mathematics have improved in both key stages.

Despite these improvements, there is still significant underachievement, especially among the boys and among potentially high attaining pupils. Some pupils have not accelerated their progress enough to catch up on previous underachievement and reach their full potential. Throughout the school, the higher attaining pupils are not always sufficiently challenged.

Work seen in pupils' books and lessons and school data indicate that progress overall has improved. Although many pupils used joined writing well, and punctuation and spelling were generally accurate, a significant minority of pupils have not made the progress expected of them in reading and writing. There were very few examples of pupils writing at length in different subjects. In mathematics, numeracy is a relative strength. Year 5 pupils explained clearly the strategies they used to carry out complex calculations and solve problems. Pupils' work showed that there were few opportunities for pupils to carry out practical investigations in mathematics. Pupils are developing a secure scientific knowledge but their work showed that they are not developing the skills of investigation.

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

- Raise standards and improve pupils' achievement in English, mathematics and science- satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Pupils are well behaved and conduct themselves with care and consideration for others. They are proud of being school and class councillors and this promotes their social and moral development. Pupils meet the expectations for them to take

responsibility for a variety of jobs in school and help others in and around school. Attendance is satisfactory. In all lessons, pupils are keen to learn, but it is only in the good lessons, which challenge their existing knowledge, that they become enthused about what they do. Pupils talk positively about some subjects, in particular, when they have practical work in science, art and design, design and technology and information and communication technology (ICT). The quality of presentation of the pupils' work, however, varies between good and inadequate and at times the pupils show a lack of pride in what they do.

Quality of provision

Action taken to improve the quality of teaching and to rebuild the confidence of staff has been partially successful. With a more consistent approach adopted by most teachers, the quality of lesson planning has improved. Specific and increasingly challenging targets for learning in literacy and numeracy have been introduced across the school. Pupils find these help them to understand what to do to improve. Systems to assess and track pupils' progress accurately have been re-introduced very recently. Teachers' planning is not yet fully informed by this information.

The efforts of the school and staff are not resulting in consistently good learning across the school. Only a small number of lessons were exciting and challenging, especially for higher attaining pupils. In a significant proportion of lessons, pupils spent too much time listening to teachers and too little time engaged in practical learning. Their exercise books show that overuse of mundane worksheets restricts their opportunities to write for different purposes. Other than in the classes for the youngest and the older pupils, lessons frequently lacked pace and too few opportunities were provided for pupils to plan and perform their own investigations, particularly in mathematics and science. Expectations of the pupils were not high enough and limited use was made of ICT.

The quality of marking ranges from good to satisfactory. Its effectiveness in guiding pupils towards their next steps in learning is improving, though pupils are not always expected to take responsibility for correcting their work. The support for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved in the last two terms. The quality of teaching for these pupils is good because of the good management of the provision and the effective skills of teachers and teaching assistants.

The curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2 has rightly remained focused on English, mathematics and science. The school correctly judges that more needs to be done to broaden opportunities for pupils to apply their skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT to other subjects, and to use links between subjects to make learning more exciting and relevant for pupils. The needs of pupils in the Reception class are effectively met. Children benefit from access to good outdoor resources and exciting learning activities indoors and out that promote good progress in each area of learning.

Pupils are well cared for and their pastoral support is good. Some well-judged changes have recently been made to the way that pupils' achievement and progress are assessed and tracked. The assessment information is not yet used well enough to identify the pupils, particularly the more able, who are underachieving so that suitable challenge can be provided.

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

- Improve teaching by using the information from tracking pupils' progress and making lessons more exciting and challenging - inadequate

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher has brought stability to the school and raised the morale and confidence of the staff, governors, parents and pupils. She has given clear direction to the work of the school and re-established many of the systems needed to allow staff to focus on improving the quality of provision. A senior leader team and a standards leadership group, consisting of leaders of the core subjects and the co-ordinator for special educational needs, have been established. Job descriptions set out the accountability for pupils' standards and the quality of provision.

The school has very recently re-established useful systems to track pupils' progress based on reliable data from externally validated tests. Leaders are at the very start of analysing assessment information. They are beginning to identify what areas of pupils' knowledge and understanding need to be improved and there are plans to use this information to identify underachievement quickly and to match targets for learning in literacy and numeracy more closely to pupils' needs. As a result of these helpful changes, the school is better placed than has been the case in the past to accelerate pupils' progress and guide teachers' professional development.

The acting headteacher, together with governors, the local authority and the new substantive headteacher, has established an improved staffing structure and class organisation for autumn 2007. The governors have rightfully raised concerns about the implications for teaching and learning of the high number of job shares within the school. For example, not all teaching teams were meeting regularly to plan lessons and continuity of learning was affected. Steps have been taken to ensure that, from September 2007, adequate planning time is allocated.

The school's action plan is clearly focused on taking action to improve in the areas identified by the previous inspection. It correctly prioritises the action to be taken within the first 12 months. Success criteria are not always specific or helpful enough in measuring the impact of actions taken on the progress of all pupils, not just on standards achieved at the end of each key stage.

The school is increasing its capability for assessing its own performance but currently is heavily reliant on local authority support to do so accurately. The findings that result from the school's own monitoring are beginning to inform priorities.

The governing body has been strengthened. There are now no vacancies and new governors provide useful expertise. It has acted quickly in appointing a new experienced substantive headteacher. Governors have supported the acting headteacher and staff very well and are increasing their role in monitoring the effectiveness of the school and holding it to account.

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

- Strengthen leadership and management, particularly the capacity to check on the school's performance and secure rapid and sustained improvement - satisfactory

External support

The local authority has provided an appropriate level of support. It identified the school as a cause for concern prior to the inspection in March 2007. The school became part of the Intensifying Support Programme and has followed a raising attainment plan (RAP) since January 2007. Following the inspection, the local authority acted promptly to appoint a temporary headteacher for the summer term to provide experience for the school in planning its improvement. A substantive appointment has been made by the governors of a headteacher to start at the school in September 2007.

A focus of the Intensifying Support Programme, led by school improvement officers and local authority consultants, has been to develop the confidence and expertise of key subject leaders and staff in the use of target setting and tracking systems and improving their monitoring of provision and pupils' progress. Despite some progress in these aspects of improvement, the school is behind schedule in implementing the raising attainment plan; it is to be relaunched to take account of new staff and developments within the school in September 2007.

The local authority's statement of action takes full account of the areas for improvement identified at the previous inspection and includes appropriate actions to be taken. It is linked closely to the raising attainment plan and the school improvement plan. Some of the timescales for actions are too long and the statement does not always make clear who is to evaluate the impact of the work of the consultants. The local authority's review carried out in June gave the school a clear picture of its progress and areas to improve. There was less evaluation of the effectiveness of the different elements of local authority support.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures - satisfactory

Prior to the monitoring visit, HMI agreed that newly qualified teachers may be appointed this term subject to the following conditions:

- monitoring is provided by a partner school, Ghyllside;
- entitlement to time away from the classroom is guaranteed.

It has not been necessary to appoint newly qualified teachers this term. Following this first visit, permission must be sought from the lead inspector before newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Make use of assessment information to ensure all pupils are challenged, especially higher attaining pupils.
- Widen the use of practical activities and opportunities for debate and discussion in lessons.
- Ensure that pupils have regular opportunities to write at length.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, Carlisle Diocese and the Director of Children's Services for Cumbria.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G Salter-Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G".

Gillian Salter-Smith
Additional Inspector