

21 November 2007

Mrs L Feakes  
Headteacher  
Simms Cross Primary School  
Kingsway  
Widnes  
Cheshire  
WA8 7QS

Dear Mrs Feakes

**SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF SIMMS CROSS  
PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Following my visit with Brenda McIntosh and Christopher Griffin, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 19 and 20 November, 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 April 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 Strategic Director for Children and Young People's Services for Halton.

Yours sincerely



Jim Alexander  
Additional Inspector

## SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF SIMMS CROSS PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 19–20 November 2007

### Evidence

Inspectors observed 12 lessons or part lessons, scrutinised documents and analysed assessment data. Inspectors met with the headteacher, members of the teaching staff, groups of children, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

### Context

Since the inspection in April 2007 there have been a number of significant changes to the staffing structure in Key Stage 2. A member of the teaching staff is currently on long-term sick leave. As a result the deputy headteacher is teaching in Year 6, a Year 3 teacher has moved to teach a Year 5 class and a supply teacher is covering the teaching in Year 3. Following consultation, the LA has agreed to establish an Interim Executive Board (IEB) to support the work of the governing body. This is currently awaiting approval from the Secretary of State.

### Achievement and standards

Standards in English, mathematics and science remain exceptionally low despite the provisional 2007 results for Key Stage 2 showing an improvement over those in 2006. Too many pupils continue to underperform and there are large gaps in their learning. The number of pupils in every year group who are working below the National Curriculum levels expected for their age is very significant. Teacher assessments at the end of Key Stage 1 in 2007 show a very similar picture to the underperformance seen in 2006. The poor results reflect the weaknesses in teaching. It is a different picture in the Foundation Stage where children get a good start to their education. The most recent assessment data for the end of Reception indicates that children's standards are improving overall when compared to those expected nationally for their age.

Achievement remains inconsistent and not strong enough because of the variations and inadequacies in the quality of teaching that persist across the school. Staff are not making precise use of the assessment information to accelerate the progress of all pupils in lessons. Too little attention is directed to boosting the progress of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Consequently, they continue to make insufficient progress. A recent initiative to improve pupils' writing skills is not yet raising standards and achievement.

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

- Improve pupils' rate of progress in English, mathematics and science, particularly Key Stage 2 – inadequate.

## Personal development and well-being

Attendance has improved since the inspection in April. The attendance rate for the first half of the autumn term in 2007, while below average, was higher than for the same period in 2006. This has been achieved despite a disappointingly large increase in the number of days missed because of term-time holidays during the first half of the 2007 autumn term. The school has stepped up its procedures to improve attendance: a member of the senior leadership team takes overall responsibility and works systematically, in partnership with the educational welfare officer and other outside agencies. The weekly publishing of attendance rates gives the matter an ongoing prominence. Good attendance is celebrated and pupils are enjoying the challenge of competing for the new weekly attendance trophy. Clerical support has been provided to enable first-day contact with parents when a child is absent. At the same time the school is taking a more robust approach to improving punctuality. Pupils' behaviour around the school remains satisfactory and their attitudes in lessons continue to be positive. They particularly enjoy their break and lunch-time opportunities to play with equipment and to use computers.

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

- Improve pupils' attendance – satisfactory.

## Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has not improved sufficiently. In too many lessons it remains weak and the overall picture is broadly similar to that found in the April 2007 inspection. This profile of teaching is not good enough to move pupils' learning on at the pace that is necessary to tackle the underachievement that persists. The expectations of what pupils are capable of achieving continue to be too low. A lack of pace in many lessons means pupils are not fully engaged, their attention drifts and learning is limited. There are too few stimulating and challenging lessons. In the better lessons, teaching was conducted at a good pace and included activities that kept pupils interested and engaged. Consequently, they made more progress. In other lessons some teachers are beginning to extend pupils' learning through careful questioning and giving them time to think and talk things through with a partner. The teachers' use of these techniques, however, lacks the precision required to gain good progress. Too often brief answers are accepted and there are missed opportunities to challenge pupils and extend their language skills. There are some examples of thorough marking which is helpful to pupils in guiding their learning, but this good practice is inconsistent.

The school has recently established a system for tracking pupils' progress but teachers do not use the information well enough to plan lessons to meet the needs of the different ability groups. Consequently, too much teaching lacks challenge, especially for the more able pupils. In addition the information is not used rigorously enough to set challenging individual targets for all pupils or to monitor their progress against the standards of which they are capable. Teachers generally display class targets and aids to support learning, particularly in helping to develop writing skills. The quality of displays, however, in some classrooms does not promote higher

standards and not all teachers refer to them often enough to support teaching and learning.

The school has made some appropriate decisions about ways to improve the curriculum since the last inspection but these improvements are not making a rapid enough impact on the pupils' day-to day experiences and standards in lessons. The time given to subjects to obtain a better balance has been reviewed and amended. Opportunities to forge links between different subjects have also been identified and pupils are increasingly using information and communication technology to support their learning. Lesson observations, however, show that curriculum planning is not ensuring that pupils of all abilities, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, are consistently challenged to work more quickly and at higher standards. In the Foundation Stage, good planning of a varied and engaging range of activities continues to give the children a good start, but the positive features are not carried forward to help build better progress in Key Stage 1.

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

- Raise teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve and improve their use of assessment to plan work which matches pupils' needs—inadequate.
- Ensure that the curriculum is planned effectively to meet the needs of pupils of all abilities and gives them opportunities to use and develop their literacy, numeracy and computer skills— inadequate.

### Leadership and management

Since the inspection in April the headteacher and senior leaders have developed a closer partnership with the LA and the school improvement partner (SIP). The LA has also arranged for a mentor headteacher from a neighbouring authority to support the work of the school. Together they have been busy establishing processes and procedures, ensuring that statutory responsibilities are met. The arrangements for safeguarding children now meet the latest requirements. A policy for performance management and associated procedures have been established and these are beginning to be used to address weaknesses in teaching.

The LA has been supporting senior staff and the subject leaders for English and mathematics. There has been some monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning, through observing lessons and scrutinising teachers' planning and pupils' work. While useful points have been raised, the monitoring has had insufficient impact on accelerating pupils' learning. The school has been developing a better view of where weaknesses lie, but too little attention has been given to the impact on pupils' progress when evaluating the actions taken. School data shows that a small group of targeted pupils are beginning to make a little better progress, but this is not the case for the majority of pupils.

The chair of governors has very recently retired and the LA has co-opted an experienced chair from a local high school. The school and LA recognise the potential of the governing body but the LA has proposed establishing an IEB to ensure the responsibilities of governance are implemented. Because of governors' limited experience, they lack the ability and rigour necessary to hold the school to account

for the standards achieved and the progress made in tackling the issues identified in April.

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

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels in raising standards and achievement – inadequate.
- Improve the effectiveness of governance in ensuring that statutory requirements are met and that the school is held to account for its performance – inadequate.

#### External support

The LA has reorganised its support for the school. A new SIP and LA adviser have been appointed. A local headteacher from a neighbouring authority is acting as a mentor to the headteacher. The LA has also deployed consultants to support the monitoring of teaching and learning. The school has been held back by the difficulties it has faced with governance and the LA has taken appropriate action and is moving at a brisk pace to establish the IEB. The school has been very well supported by the clear focus and challenge of the SIP: the most recent report provides a very accurate statement of the school's current position and actions that are necessary. The LA's statement of action is also clear but the support and challenge are not resulting in fast enough improvement. The original date set for the removal of special measures is considered by the LA and inspectors as optimistic and is being reviewed.

#### Priorities for further improvement

The priorities identified in the April 2007 report remain the most important for the school.