

1 February 2008

Mr J Starling
Acting Headteacher
Buxton Primary School
Aylsham Road
Norwich
Norfolk
NR10 5EZ

Dear Mr Starling

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BUXTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

Following my visit to your school on 22 and 23 January 2008, 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 June 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

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 the Interim Executive Board and the Director of Children's Services for Norfolk.

Yours sincerely

Tricia Pritchard
H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF BUXTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 22 and 23 January 2008

Evidence

HMI observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, teaching staff, non-teaching staff, pupils, members of the interim executive board and representatives from the local authority.

Context

In September 2007, an acting headteacher was appointed to cover the absence of the headteacher. This is the fifth headteacher appointment in seven years. Governance is provided presently by an interim executive board appointed by the local authority.

Since the start of the academic year, there has been considerable instability of staffing in every class except for the Year 6 class. The most turbulence has been in the Reception/Year 1 class and in the Year 4/5 class. With the appointment of two extra teachers in November and December 2007, Year 2 and Year 3 pupils are taught separately every morning for literacy and numeracy and pupils in Year 4 and Year 5 have been re-grouped into two classes according to ability. There has been an increase in the number of pupils on roll and an increase in non-teaching staff. In January 2008, an extra teaching assistant joined the school with additional responsibilities as pastoral officer and extended school coordinator.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards remain inadequate. Since the inspection, national data on the performance of Year 2 and Year 6 pupils in English, mathematics and science in 2007 has become available. At Key Stage 1, there is a continuing downward trend in achievement. Pupils' attainment in reading, writing and mathematics has steadily declined during the last four years from well above the national average to below. No Year 2 pupils last year attained higher levels for writing and mathematics but they did for reading. Boys under performed considerably in reading and writing but did better in mathematics. Pupils with additional learning needs performed well in all subjects in comparison to pupils with similar needs in other schools.

The trend for Key Stage 2 pupils to make inadequate progress in relation to their starting points continues to be an issue, especially in mathematics and science. Despite Year 6 pupils gaining scores for reading, writing and mathematics, which were well above the national averages when they were in Year 2, their results at the end of year 6 were just in line with the national average in mathematics and slightly above in English. Science scores dipped sharply to below the national average. Only half of Year 6 pupils made the expected progress in mathematics and three quarters made the expected progress in English between Year 3 and Year 6. Higher attaining pupils did better in English than in mathematics and science. Girls did better than boys in all subjects. Pupils with additional learning needs did not do as well as similar pupils in other schools.

On examining the work of current pupils, it is evident that the accuracy of teacher assessment, especially in writing, is an issue and that pupils' attainment may have been assessed over-generously in the past. Since September, the school has made a satisfactory start in tracking pupils' progress more systematically, particularly in mathematics. Half-termly assessments are carried out and because the data is well presented, teachers are more aware of the progress pupils are making. Pupils who are falling behind are targeted for extra help. Subject leaders, too, are analysing the outcomes of end-of-year tests in order to identify areas for development. These are all good developments. The latest school data indicates that pupils have made faster progress in the last three months than in the previous six months. However, there is still much ground to cover if pupils are to make consistently satisfactory progress and achieve their potential by the end of Year 6. The main challenge for teachers is to make full use of this assessment information to inform planning and teaching.

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

- use the available data more effectively to identify what is needed to improve the rate of pupils' progress and raise standards in English, mathematics and science – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being continues to be satisfactory. No bad behaviour was observed during the inspection visit. In the playground and in the dining hall, pupils play happily and talk to one another. They understand the school's behaviour policy and the consequences if they misbehave. This marks an improvement since the inspection in June 2007. However, in lessons, not all pupils pay attention for the whole time. Although the opportunity for pupils to bring water bottles to school is a welcome initiative, their continuous use by some boys during lessons, especially while the teacher is talking, leads to lapses in attention. Consequently, this restricts their progress.

Pupils are articulate and good at conversing with adults. Those on the school council take their responsibilities seriously. They have plenty of ideas relating to improving the school environment and speak enthusiastically about the after-school clubs and improved computer facilities. In Year 6, pupils particularly enjoy their business enterprise sessions.

Attendance is in line with the national average.

Quality of provision

Pupils' learning, until recently, has been inadequate due to instability in staffing and inconsistencies in the quality of teaching. The work in pupils' books indicates that there has been insufficient progression and continuity in learning. In the last three months, however, there have been signs of improvement. A contributory factor is the introduction of 'learning ladders' in every class where pupils can see their targets for English, mathematics and science and monitor their progress towards meeting them. The scheme is proving to be highly motivating for pupils and for teachers, who have readily accepted the benefits of this approach. Pupils know their targets and parents are well informed too.

Although the quality of teaching observed during the monitoring visit was satisfactory overall, the school has yet to meet its initial target of at least half to be good or better. More consistently good teaching is needed to accelerate pupils' progress and raise standards to expected levels. The pace of lessons has improved and teachers are confident using interactive whiteboards to support teaching and learning. They are also committed to improving their practice. However, there is still room for further development in differentiating work to meet the full range of pupils' needs and particularly those of higher attaining pupils.

The balance of the curriculum is another area for development. Ninety minute literacy lessons are too long and there is a lack of variety in the timetable because numeracy and literacy are timetabled at the same time every day in most classes. Not enough opportunities are provided for pupils to write independently in other subject areas, such as history and geography. Too often, pupils are required to complete worksheets in these subjects which lack challenge. Presentation of pupils' work also needs improving, especially in Key Stage 2. For example, it is not easy for teachers to track pupils' progress in literacy when books contain a mixture of exercises, unfinished work and pieces of extended writing.

Pupils with additional learning needs receive helpful guidance from teaching assistants. The youngest pupils are very well supported and are given good opportunities to develop their linguistic, social and mathematical skills in a well structured, activity-based learning environment.

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

- give pupils greater understanding of their targets and involve them consistently in recording and checking their own progress – good progress

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher is leading the school well. He has a very good understanding of the strengths and areas for development and has been successful in creating a good team ethos amongst staff, pupils and parents. Communication with parents has improved significantly and this judgment is corroborated by the positive responses to the recent parent questionnaire. Changes to the physical environment, such as the creation of a new computer suite and a Key Stage 2 library are welcome improvements and further developments are planned.

A good start has been made on clarifying the roles of subject leaders. A key priority now is to develop them professionally so that they also share responsibility for driving the school forward and raising standards. They have begun to observe lessons and scrutinise pupils' work but are not skilled fully in giving focused feedback on strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning. They are keen to be involved and possess a much better understanding of progress and standards than previously. However, they have yet to pick up on issues, such as a lack of challenge for higher attaining pupils, and to give a lead on how to improve the quality of learning. Overall, the strategic leadership and management of the acting headteacher are good but there is still more work to be done at middle management level.

The school is very well supported by the interim executive board, which has replaced the governing body temporarily. Members possess considerable expertise and experience of good governance. The school improvement and development plan together with the raising attainment plan drive the agenda. They are well presented and focused firmly on addressing the key issues from the last inspection. Actions are clearly specified and timelines are realistic. The plans are monitored closely. With strengths in the acting headteacher and the interim executive board, and well focused support from the local authority, the school demonstrates good capacity to improve.

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

- improve the strategic leadership and management at all levels so that responsibilities and accountability of all involved are clearly defined and there are systems to evaluate the impact of these – satisfactory
- bring greater rigour into monitoring teaching and learning to address identified weaknesses - satisfactory

External support

When the school went into special measures, the local authority acted swiftly to strengthen the leadership capacity of the school and seconded an acting headteacher with recent experience of supporting schools through difficult times. The local authority also sought permission to replace the governing body with an interim executive board. These initiatives are having a positive impact on addressing the areas for development identified in the inspection report and particularly on setting the strategic direction of the school. The school is benefiting from an intensive support programme led by local authority advisers. Help has been targeted at setting up a robust system for tracking pupils' progress and this is being implemented well. The local authority has identified rightly the need to improve the overall quality of teaching and this is a key priority for future adviser and consultant visits. There has been some slippage in the targets set for raising standards and improving the quality of teaching in the local authority's statement of action, but unforeseen staffing difficulties have been a contributory factor. Overall, the statement of action is a well structured document. Considerable progress has been made in improving the leadership and management of the school in a short time. The target date for removal from special measures is December 2008. The challenge is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in order to raise standards and to meet this target.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increasing the proportion of good teaching
- Accelerating pupils' progress in all subjects
- Ensuring consistency and accuracy of teacher assessment
- Reviewing curriculum balance and content.