

29 November 2007

Mr G Senior
Acting Headteacher
Merton Bank Primary School
Roper Street
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 1EJ

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Dear Mr Senior

**SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MERTON BANK
PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Following my visit with Ronald Bulman, Additional Inspector, to your school on 27 and 28 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 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. 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 and Young People's Services for St Helens.

Yours sincerely

Margot D'Arcy
Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF MERTON BANK PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 27–28 November 2007

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher and other staff, governors and representatives of the local authority (LA); informal discussions were held with pupils.

Context

The acting headteacher present at the June 2007 inspection has left and a new acting headteacher has been appointed for the autumn term. A new headteacher has been appointed and will take up post in January 2008. In addition to the school's permanent deputy headteacher, a LA primary consultant has been seconded to the school as a second deputy headteacher. This appointment is on a full-time basis for the autumn term, reducing to three days in the spring term and being phased out by Easter 2008. The LA has also seconded a teacher to act as the school's special educational needs coordinator. Two teachers have left the school, two are on long-term leave of absence and another is currently absent. The LA has removed the governing body's delegated powers in relation to staffing and finance.

Achievement and standards

The school's most recent national test and assessment results (2007) showed improvement in English at both key stages. Whilst standards remained well below average by the end of Year 6, the proportions reaching the expected and the higher levels were better than in 2006. The improvements reflect the impact of the significant support for literacy the school has received from the LA over the last two years. Pupils continue to achieve well in Year 6, but elsewhere, progress remains inconsistent. The standards in mathematics are also of concern. Test and assessment results in 2007 showed significant decline at both key stages. Results were well below average, with far fewer pupils than nationally reaching the expected levels by the end of Years 2 and 6. Pupils' significant underachievement in this subject is evident in their weak calculation skills and knowledge of strategies to solve mathematical problems. The school's main focus since the inspection has, understandably, been on English and mathematics, but they are aware that pupils continue to underachieve in science.

The most recent results, and the school's own initial assessments of the progress of pupils with special educational needs, shows that this group, too, are not achieving as well as they should. The school has no significant evidence of how well pupils who are learning English as an additional language are achieving. In lessons, the progress of these pupils was patchy, influenced mainly by their level of English language competence rather than additional support provided by the school.

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

- Raise standards and increase pupils' rate of progress, particularly in English – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

Standards of behaviour are improving in response to better policies and procedures, an intensive programme of staff training and input from external behavioural support agencies. Appropriate consultation with pupils and parents has also aided the improvements. Pupils understand the new rewards and sanctions and many make considerable efforts to gain Golden Time at the end of the week. A vigorous anti-bullying campaign has raised pupils' awareness of the harm this behaviour inflicts. They have greater understanding of the support available and actions they should take where instances persist. The supervision of pupils at play and lunchtimes has improved significantly. Welfare and canteen staff commented positively on the changes they have noticed during the last term. In discussions with pupils, improved behaviour is the first thing they mention. Many explain that they feel safer and the school is 'a friendlier place'.

Many pupils have responded to recent opportunities to assume responsibility, for example, as play leaders. These pupils are vigilant and supportive, for instance, when younger ones seem unhappy or left out of play. Their cheerful efforts enliven a fairly drab and featureless playground, lacking in outdoor equipment. In most lessons, pupils are attentive and cooperative, even when presentations are lengthy or monotonous. However, some become restless if the pace is too slow or the content inappropriately matched to their needs. The minority of pupils who persist in poor behaviour require and receive firm management and significant additional attention.

The importance of good attendance and punctuality has been reinforced with pupils and their parents. Together with effective support from the education welfare officer, a marked improvement in these areas is also evident.

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

- Improve behaviour at Key Stage 2 – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Whilst there have been some improvements to elements of teaching, such as lesson planning and management of pupils' behaviour, the quality remains inconsistent. Some teaching is still inadequate and too much teaching fails to be better than satisfactory. The overall quality is still not good enough to move pupils on at the rate that is needed to raise standards and eradicate the legacy of past underachievement.

Some strengths seen in the June 2007 inspection continue. For example, in some lessons stimulating tasks interest and motivate pupils but also challenge them because work is well matched to their needs. Lessons of this nature do not occur

frequently enough, however, because many teachers lack skills in accurately assessing pupils' standards, which hinders them in matching work sharply enough to the range of needs in their classes. Throughout the school, teachers are providing more opportunities for pupils to learn independently, in groups or with talking and reading partners. There are still too many lessons where pupils are required to sit passively for lengthy periods, which slows learning because they lose interest. Weaknesses in the teaching of mathematics include incorrect use of mathematical vocabulary and insufficient teaching of problem solving strategies. Teachers do not do enough to help pupils see the relevance of tasks to everyday life. Although the overall quality of provision for children in the Foundation Stage was found to be satisfactory in June, current provision is not good enough to promote consistently satisfactory learning. Here, the quality of teaching and learning is often inadequate in sessions where children choose their own activities. This is because many staff are not skilled enough to know how to take learning forward in these situations.

Support staff have begun to be more involved in planning and assessment. When these staff are well briefed, they make a positive impact on pupils' learning, for instance, by ensuring pupils stay involved in whole-class sessions and have support in tackling their tasks. Their impact is less effective when they are not given enough guidance on how best to move pupils' learning on. In such circumstances, support staff sometimes provide pupils with answers too quickly or complete work for them to get the task done. Throughout the school, pupils at an early stage of learning English are not always included as well as they might be in lessons because staff are unsure of how best to help them.

New systems for assessing and recording pupils' standards have recently been implemented. These have the potential to support the setting of challenging targets to meet pupils' individual needs. The systems are, however, at an early stage of development. The focus on assessment has begun to increase teachers' understanding of how they might cater for the range of needs within their classes and has resulted in the formulation of targets for different groups. However, the accuracy of teachers' assessments is not yet secure so the use of assessment information is still not challenging all pupils to move on as quickly as they should. Only in December will the first, measurable, indications of pupil progress in different year groups be available. This information will need to be treated cautiously, however, given that the precision of teacher assessments is not yet secure.

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

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning – inadequate.
- Make better use of assessment to set more challenging targets for pupils that are closely matched to their needs – inadequate.

Leadership and management

Given historical weaknesses in improvement planning and staff's leadership roles, the LA's raising attainment plan is providing the steer for school improvement. The

acting headteacher has been appropriately consulted about the plan, which is focusing the school effectively on the right actions and initiatives. The acting headteacher and seconded deputy headteacher have worked very effectively together and have quickly gained an accurate view of the quality of teaching. This is guiding appropriate support and intervention. More robust systems to monitor and evaluate the school's work are beginning to be established and there is a very clear focus on the need to raise standards. The new assessment and tracking systems should, in time, add to the information the school has to support effective monitoring and self-evaluation. Work on developing other managers' roles in these processes has begun, but has had too little time to be fully embedded. Developments have also been limited because the school is awaiting external appointments to middle management roles. The school recognises the need to develop quickly the permanent deputy headteacher's role so that the school can sustain its capacity for improvement when support from LA consultants is phased out.

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

- Establish robust systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school to better inform planning for improvement – satisfactory.

External support

The statement of action provided by the LA fulfils requirements. A targeted approach to school improvement is in place with a realistic view to the school coming out of special measures in May 2009. The quality and impact of the external support has been good. Effective personnel have been seconded to the school and advanced skills teachers and specialist agencies are providing additional support. In particular, this has had a positive impact on improving the quality of monitoring and evaluation and strategies to promote better behaviour.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning in the Foundation Stage.
- Ensure that the school's permanent deputy headteacher is able to take a strong and effective role in monitoring and evaluating the school's work.