

17 March 2008

Mrs Lesley 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 Peter Jones and Judith Tolley, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 13 and 14 March 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second 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 – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – 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 Interim Executive Board and the Director of Education for Halton.

Yours sincerely



Jim Alexander
Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF SIMMS CROSS PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the second monitoring inspection: 13 and 14 March 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including 14 lessons or part lessons, scrutinised documents and analysed assessment data. Inspectors met with the headteacher, groups of pupils, the chair of governors, the chair and members of the Interim Executive Board (IEB) and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection in November 2007, there have been a number of changes; most significantly the IEB has been approved by the Secretary of State and has been meeting fortnightly since January 2008. One teacher remains on long-term sick leave and as a result, there are two temporary teachers for Year 3. Following consultation, the LA has agreed to provide a mentor headteacher to support the school's focus on teaching and learning.

Achievement and standards

Although standards remain too low in English, mathematics and science, they continue to improve. Fewer pupils underperform and the gaps in their learning are reducing. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those in the two classes in the special needs unit, are also making better progress. The newly introduced system for tracking pupils' progress is providing clear evidence that pupils are making better gains in English and mathematics. Progress across the school is strongest in mathematics. Writing remains the weakest area in English. The tracking system has also identified that some groups are faring less well than others, for example, girls in Year 3 perform less well than boys. Previously, too much time was given to boosting the performance of a small group of pupils but every pupil is now set an individual target in English and mathematics, ensuring that progress is carefully monitored. Because of the legacy of underachievement, the percentage of pupils working below the level expected for their age is significant, but the situation is improving. The assessment and monitoring of pupils' progress is not as well developed in science. Consequently, the school does not have an accurate picture of pupils' progress in this subject to set suitable targets for improvement.

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

- Improve children's rate of progress in English, mathematics and science, particularly Key Stage 2 - satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

The school continues to promote the need for good attendance with pupils and parents. Attendance figures have fluctuated since November, but they have regained the level reached at the last monitoring inspection. Pupils also comment that lessons

are 'becoming more fun and interesting' and this, too, is beginning to motivate them to attend more regularly. Overall attendance is just below the national average but the school's efforts to improve attendance are more successful in some classes than others. Year 6 pupils, for example, consistently achieve 95% attendance, while Year 3 pupils struggle to achieve 89% attendance. Punctuality has improved overall, with more pupils regularly arriving on time. The open-door policy has done much to encourage this, for instance, in the way that parents and pupils read together or share work that was completed the previous day. Behaviour around the school and in class remains satisfactory overall but is improving. There have been six fixed-term exclusions since the last monitoring inspection. Pupils' attitudes to learning in lessons continue to be positive; pupils comment that, 'We now know what is expected of us. The headteacher has helped us realise that we need to put more effort into our lessons.'

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

- Improve attendance - satisfactory

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has improved since the last monitoring inspection, most markedly in the spring term. This is reflected in the outcomes of the intensive monitoring by the school and LA. There is more satisfactory and good teaching than previously, and fewer inadequate lessons. The school's switch of emphasis onto learning and the progress pupils make is beginning to bear fruit. Teachers make better use of a range of resources, particularly computers and interactive whiteboards, to stimulate learning. There are more lessons where work is suitably matched to the needs of individual pupils; however, the most able pupils continue to be insufficiently challenged in many lessons. The use of curricular targets is better embedded in daily work and pupils are more aware of them. The school's analysis of the effectiveness of teacher talk in developing pupils' speaking, listening and problem-solving skills has also helped to raise expectations. There remain, however, too many occasions where pupils sit passively and opportunities for more active learning are missed.

The curriculum has been revised to improve the breadth and balance. The amount of science taught per week has been increased in both key stages. The timetable has been adjusted to ensure that teaching time is utilised more fully across the school. Within planning, opportunities to teach basic skills are clearly identified in all subjects and the use of information and communication technology is also included. The pupils' transition from the Foundation Stage into Key Stage 1 has been improved, with more consideration given to pupils' individual learning styles.

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 – satisfactory
- 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 – satisfactory

Leadership and management

Since the last monitoring inspection, leaders have acted swiftly to address weaknesses and implement structures and procedures to move the school forward. There is an acceptance that areas of the school's work need to improve, with a collective drive and determination to make a difference. Monitoring is more rigorous, giving a much more accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses. Leaders have rightly established some non-negotiable expectations with all staff. Leaders and managers have continued to build an effective partnership with the LA and this has been significant for the school's development. Together, they have provided very focused support for teaching and learning, helping to raise standards within lessons. Subject leaders are becoming an integral part of the more effective monitoring and evaluation. They are involved in classroom observations, scrutiny of pupils' work and planning professional development for their colleagues. They show a better understanding of the school's strategic planning and their work is more carefully framed within its objectives.

Since its appointment in January 2008, the IEB has rapidly taken decisive and effective action to ensure improvements are made. Their hands-on approach to monitoring ensures that advice, guidance and expectations are sharply focused and incisive. Since January 2008, there has been a significant change of focus. Sights are now clearly fixed on pupils and the progress they make. The IEB has established a positive partnership with the governing body and the leadership and management of the school. It has ensured that governors are informed of developments and provided a good model of effective governance. The governing body has been organised into committees and is receiving ongoing training and development. Much has been achieved since the last monitoring inspection.

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 – satisfactory
- Improve the effectiveness of governance in ensuring statutory requirements are met and that the school is held to account for its performance – satisfactory

External support

Since the last monitoring visit, the LA has increased the support and challenge the school receives. The importance of the establishment of the IEB and its impact on school improvement cannot be underestimated. Advice from the LA's consultants has also been of a high standard and is reflected in the improvements seen in the classrooms. The LA has also provided further support through the new mentor headteacher, helping the school focus on learning and the progress pupils make. The quality, rigour and challenge of this support have resulted in a sea change within the school affecting all the areas identified for improvement.

Priorities for further improvement

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