

13 March 2008

Mr J Holian
Headteacher
Merton Bank Primary School
Roper Street
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 1EJ

Dear Mr Holian

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MERTON BANK PRIMARY SCHOOL

Following my visit with Sarah Drake, Additional Inspector, to your school on 11 and 12 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 June 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed only in consultation with the lead inspector.

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 SCHOOL

Report from the second monitoring inspection: 11 and 12 March 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed lessons in each class, analysed pupils' work and a range of school documentation. Pupils' conduct was observed in various contexts. Discussions were held with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher and other staff, the chair of governors, pupils and parents. A meeting was held with the school improvement partner (SIP) from the local authority (LA).

Context

The acting headteacher, present at the previous visit, left at the end of the autumn term and the current, permanent, headteacher took up his appointment in January this year. The second deputy headteacher, seconded from the LA, left at the end of the February half term. One teacher has returned from sick leave, one has resigned and another has recently gone on long-term leave of absence. Two permanent teaching appointments have been made, both of which include middle management responsibilities.

Achievement and standards

Standards remain low. The legacy of underachievement is beginning to be tackled, but pupils are still not progressing at a fast enough rate. This is due mainly to the inconsistencies that remain in the quality of teaching, exacerbated by continuing weaknesses in assessment. Where teachers are becoming more adept at using assessment information to set pupils challenging targets this is paying off and the rate of progress is accelerating. However, this type of provision is not consistent so too many pupils are not making up lost ground and some are continuing to underachieve. Data from the school's increasingly frequent assessments of pupils' writing and mathematical standards suggest some significant improvements to progress in these areas. However, the accuracy and reliability of this information is questionable. Inspection evidence from lessons and analysis of pupils' work shows that progress is patchy and not as good as that implied by the school's assessment data. Standards and achievement in mathematics continue to be an area of significant concern. The school is aware that there is a need to extend the data it maintains, as currently there is no real evidence of pupils' standards and progress in reading or science, or reliable information of the standards and progress of children in the Foundation Stage.

The progress of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the minority who speak English as an additional language has begun to be tracked separately. However, it is too early to say whether the progress of these groups is notably any different or more consistent across the school than that of others. Particularly strong teaching for some Year 6 pupils is having a very positive impact on raising standards and progress in this class.

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

Pupils' behaviour continues to improve. While pupils say that there are still a few who occasionally disrupt lessons, staff, pupils and parents agree that poor behaviour is essentially a thing of the past. Pupils are friendly and forthcoming to visitors and generally polite. Most respond positively to teachers' expectations of how pupils should behave, but some still need frequent reminders. No unsatisfactory behaviour was seen during this visit other than in one class where good intervention from the teacher meant that the lesson progressed without disruption. Pupils say that bullying has reduced greatly and now consists only of occasional name calling. Pupils appreciate 'Golden Time' and merit assemblies and say that these have been very effective in helping to improve behaviour and effort in lessons. Particularly good behaviour was noted in a whole-school assembly, which instilled a good sense of community spirit, along with input about safety and healthy living. Pupils' enjoyment of school is evidenced by their attendance levels, which continue to improve.

Older pupils enjoy their roles as activity leaders, helping younger ones at lunchtime play. Break and lunchtimes are becoming more civilised and happy times, with resources such as hoops and skipping ropes helping to keep pupils occupied. The new headteacher has worked hard to provide pupils with the opportunity to be involved in making decisions about how their playground should be developed and having a say about the type of play that is provided. Lunchtime and welfare staff say that improvements to behaviour are continuing and that recent training from the new headteacher has helped them understand more clearly how to interact with pupils. The headteacher has also effectively reorganised the school's 'nurture group' provision and arranged specialised training for staff. This has enabled vulnerable Key Stage 2 pupils to develop personal skills, such as cooperation, resolving problems and developing control over their behaviour.

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

- Improve behaviour at Key Stage 2 – satisfactory

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching remains similar to that seen on the last visit. Improvements are occurring here and there, but the overall quality is still too inconsistent. Teaching in Year 6 remains a significant strength. In some other classes teaching is occasionally good, but not consistently so. New teaching appointments look promising in terms of supporting future improvements but, currently, the quality of teaching has not improved sufficiently to tackle underachievement. Too many satisfactory lessons are a long way off being good and inadequate teaching is still evident.

Work is frequently planned to provide different levels of challenge and support, but in practice this does not always pan out because it is not firmly based on accurate

assessment of pupils' needs. Questioning does not always stretch those pupils who are capable of higher attainment and expectations of the amount and quality of recorded work are often not high enough. While pupils settle well in lessons, they often take too long to start writing. Sometimes they do not have enough time to write much because teachers have talked for too long. In some classes pupils are too dependent on the teacher and do little without continuous prompting or direct support. Inconsistencies remain in the processes used to set targets and in helping pupils understand the purpose of lessons, and how well they have progressed. Marking is often too positive and fails to provide sufficiently clear guidance to help pupils improve. Some comments are not followed through, so pupils continue to make the same mistakes and, worryingly, there is some inaccurate marking in mathematics.

Relationships between teachers and pupils continue to be strong, as does teachers' management of pupils' behaviour. In classrooms the ethos for learning is much better and quality displays provide appropriate support for the development of basic skills. Many teachers are also providing creative activities that really capture pupils' interest and motivate them to work. For example, pupils devise games for which they then have to write instructions, identify persuasive language by analysing advertisements from different media, and debate the pros and cons of zoos. Pupils clearly appreciate all of this and report, 'Lessons are easier because behaviour has improved' and 'You don't really know you're learning because teachers give us interesting things to do.'

Some steps have been taken to improve the impact of learning support assistants, but this remains inconsistent. Although they are now reasonably briefed about their role in group activities through teachers' planning, they do not always have a clear or strong enough role in whole-class sessions. The quality of their input in group work also continues to vary significantly.

The use of assessment information is developing, with staff becoming more aware of how this can support their teaching. There are still issues, however, over the accuracy of assessment and inconsistency in how effectively information is used to set pupils challenging targets. Systems for tracking pupils' progress are not yet rigorous enough to identify pupils' different rates of progress. The school is considering changing to a new system from the one begun in the autumn term, but it is only envisaged that this will be implemented in September 2008. Meanwhile, the systems being used do not provide a particularly clear view of how well pupils are progressing. Moreover, they are not a very useful tool to support the processes of monitoring and evaluation.

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

The LA's raising attainment plan continues to provide the steer for school improvement. Since his appointment the new headteacher has begun to gain an overview of the school's work. The inevitable 'settling in' period, in which staff, pupils and parents have had to get to know and adjust to a new leader has been managed effectively by the headteacher. Good relationships are being forged and the headteacher has sent out a clear message about the need to improve standards and provision. He has assumed a high profile in monitoring and promoting pupils' behaviour and in working with parents to support their children's learning at home. He has also put great effort into 'marketing' the school, coordinating the production of photographic books and a DVD, and enhancing the décor to provide a welcoming atmosphere, enhanced by 'mood music'. The headteacher's initial observations of all teachers provided him with an insight to the quality of teaching and led to some decisive action to address weak teaching and improve the quality of provision in the Foundation Stage. However, other than a very recent analysis of pupils' work by the senior management team, no other significant monitoring of the school's provision and outcomes for pupils has occurred. As such, the school's current view of itself, and of its progress in addressing the key areas for improvement, is insecure and generally too positive.

Monitoring does not extend much beyond the headteacher. The deputy headteacher's role in this aspect of the school's work has not moved on sufficiently since the last monitoring inspection, despite a clear message that it should do so. There has been some re-structuring of staff roles and responsibilities since then, including that of the deputy headteacher. However, the deputy's revised role does not reflect adequately, either on paper or in practice, the significance of this key position because it is not focused sharply enough on driving up standards and improving the quality of provision. There is also some confusion in the school about who is responsible and accountable for leading and managing the development of assessment and mathematics, both of which require considerable improvement. It is the headteacher's view that the deputy headteacher has provided very good support for him during his first term. However, there are clearly weaknesses in the flow of information between the senior leaders about the work that is being done to improve assessment, because the headteacher is insufficiently informed about developments in this area, which is currently being led by the deputy headteacher. The headteacher has consulted well with the staff in putting together a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation policy. This should support the development of robust systems to guide improvement planning. However, the policy has still to be ratified by governors so will only be implemented next term. The development of subject managers is, obviously, linked to this policy so this too is planned for next term.

There are some clear strengths in the senior management team both from long-standing and new staff, although the latter have had little time to make a significant impact. That said, the new inclusion manager has led some improvements to the provision and monitoring of vulnerable pupils, such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those learning English as an additional language. The senior management team has recently been involved in monitoring pupils' work. The exercise revealed similar weaknesses in teaching to those identified by inspectors, but provided minimal evidence of pupils' progress. The report summarising the

findings of the exercise failed to comment on pupils' progress or the use of targets in mathematics, despite the latter being a specific focus of the exercise. The monitoring of assessment information to inform secure evaluations of the school's progress also lacks rigour. Although the school acknowledges that the accuracy of assessments is not yet secure, comments from analyses of this data focus only on those pupils who appear to have made progress. No observations are recorded about those who seem to have 'stood still' or indeed about those whose progress appears to have gone backwards.

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 – inadequate

External support

The LA understandably lowered the intensity of its input this term to give the new headteacher time to settle in and make his mark. A planned review from the LA coincided with this monitoring inspection so was postponed. Regular contact has been maintained, however, including weekly visits from the new SIP. The SIP's knowledge of the school's work and progress is clear in the context of the LA's level of intervention this term. The school has also received some support for mathematics and to guide the leadership of assessment. The latter identified weaknesses in the school's evidence of progress in this area, but illness has prevented the follow up that was planned for the beginning of this month. Although teaching remains inconsistent, the weekly support from advanced skills teachers is having a positive impact.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that senior leaders are focused clearly on promoting the school's progress against the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in June 2007, particularly in relation to driving up standards and improving provision.
- Improve communication so that there is a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and, regardless of delegated responsibilities, the headteacher is fully informed of developments and progress in all of the areas for improvement raised by the inspection in June 2007.