

13 June 2008

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 Jan Corlett and Ron Bulman, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 11 and 12 June 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third 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.

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 and Young People's Directorate for Halton.

Yours sincerely



Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF SIMMS CROSS PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the third monitoring inspection: 11 and 12 June 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including 13 lessons or part lessons, scrutinised documents and analysed assessment data. Inspectors met with the headteacher, groups of pupils, the chair and members of the Interim Executive Board (IEB), the chair of governors and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, there have been a number of staff changes. The Year 2 teacher, who had leadership responsibility for English, left at Easter and has been replaced by a temporary teacher for one term who was teaching Year 3. Another temporary teacher continues to teach Year 3. A Year 5 teacher has taken the responsibility for the leadership of English. A member of staff who was on long-term sick leave has returned and is currently supporting the teaching and learning in Year 6.

Achievement and standards

Although standards remain low in English, mathematics and science, they continue to improve. Fewer pupils are underperforming and more are meeting or exceeding their targets and working at age-related expectations. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those in the two special needs unit classes, are also making better progress. The recently introduced system to track pupils' progress provides clear evidence that pupils across the school are making better gains in mathematics, writing and reading. The school has had greatest success in raising standards in mathematics; progress here has been good since the last monitoring inspection. Standards in writing are also improving as a consequence of the introduction of the 'Big Write' initiative. The tracking system has also helped the school identify that some classes are improving at a faster rate than others. Pupils in Years 5, 6 and Key Stage 1, for example, are making much better progress than those in lower Key Stage 2. A significant proportion of pupils in Years 3 and 4 continue to make inadequate progress. Unvalidated results for the Key Stage 1 national tests demonstrate that pupils in Year 2 have made better progress in their learning this year. Standards in reading and writing have risen and those in mathematics have improved particularly strongly. The proportion of pupils gaining higher levels, however, has remained the same as last year. The school has worked hard to develop more rigorous tracking of pupils' progress and standards in science. The amount of data, however, is limited and does not yet give a clear enough picture of the standards that pupils reach or the progress they make in this subject.

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

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

Personal development and well-being

The school's continual effort to promote good attendance is proving increasingly successful. Attendance figures have improved since March and are now much closer to the national average; indeed, the school has already exceeded the targets set by the LA. The number of unauthorised absences has fallen and pupils' punctuality has improved. Behaviour in lessons and around the school continues to improve and pupils say, 'things have got so much better this year'. There have been no exclusions since the last monitoring visit and this compares very favourably with previously. The school has introduced learning champions, pupils who work alongside the school council to encourage and model positive attitudes to learning. This is enhancing the opportunities for pupils to have a voice in how their school is organised. The impact of this very new initiative, however, is limited at this early stage of its development.

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

- Improve attendance – good

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is improving. When compared with the position in March, the proportion of good or better lessons has increased and the number of inadequate lessons has decreased. Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve, in terms of learning, behaviour and attitudes in class, continue to rise. Pupils are more actively involved in practical learning and the use of 'talking partners' greatly helps their concentration and involvement in lessons. Lessons are also split into smaller, more focused sessions. This has enabled the pace of learning to increase; pupils are less easily distracted. Teachers are using assessment data much more consistently to identify any underperformance that may occur and then plan work to address the particular needs pupils may have. The marking of pupils' work is generally becoming more thorough. It is identifying more clearly the next steps pupils need to take in order to reach their target or individual lesson objective. This is particularly the case in the marking of writing, which is helping pupils make accelerated progress in this aspect of English. Pupils say that this increased ownership in their learning is 'really helping us get better'. Teachers' planning is also improving and now includes distinct tasks for those with different abilities in mathematics and increasingly so in English. This improving practice is not yet consistent across the school, particularly in some lower Key Stage 2 classes. Improvements in the quality of teaching are having the greatest impact on raising achievement and standards in Key Stage 1 and upper Key Stage 2.

The curriculum is now providing better links between subjects and more opportunities for pupils to practise their basic skills across a range of subjects. Improvements have been made in science, particularly in terms of developing more practical and investigational tasks. A recent science week enabled pupils to engage in a wide range of exciting activities, which were 'really great fun'. The school is moving to a more thematic approach to delivering the curriculum, while ensuring that a strong focus remains on English and mathematics; further developments are planned for September. However, the curriculum is not yet developed sufficiently robustly to meet the needs of the more able pupils in many of the classes. Information and

communication technology (ICT) is also increasingly being used as a tool to support teaching and learning across the curriculum, rather than as a separate lesson in which ICT skills are taught. Pupils also have a greater opportunity to use the interactive whiteboards, which is helping learning become more 'interesting and exciting'. Work in the Foundation Stage has a better balance between adult-lead and child-initiated learning activities. The outdoor provision has been enhanced by a new sensory garden. Access to the outdoor facility for the children in the Reception class, however, remains very limited.

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 – good
- 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 visit the school leaders, particularly the headteacher, have become increasingly reflective, accurately analysing the impact of actions taken to raise standards. This is based on robust monitoring of the work of the school. This sharper focus, together with regular monitoring, has helped improve the quality of teaching and learning in lessons. It has also helped the school identify more accurately where areas of inadequate progress occur in lower Key Stage 2; this is enabling focused support and challenge to be planned. The headteacher continues to build a very effective partnership with the LA and this is proving to be a very significant factor in the progress the school is making. The LA's consultants support the curriculum leaders, who are playing an increasing and effective role in the monitoring of their own subjects. The school is currently reviewing its leadership structure. In January 2009 the staffing is to be restructured to bring a sharper focus on school improvement.

Since its appointment in January 2008, the IEB has proved to be a significant driving force for good in the school. The board members' continued 'hands-on' approach to leadership has ensured that momentum is maintained and improvements continue. They are currently developing a shadow governing body to work alongside the IEB from September, so that skills and expertise can be developed in readiness for full transfer of responsibilities later in the year.

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 that statutory requirements are met and that the school is held to account for its performance – satisfactory

External support

The high level and quality of support the school receives from the LA has been maintained since the last monitoring visit. The LA has organised effective links to be made, with staff from a local high school for example, to support the development of science in the curriculum. The LA also has a clear strategy for the future, when special measures are no longer necessary. For example, it is planning the phased introduction of a shadow governing body while the IEB keeps the school firmly accountable for the standards reached. The LA is aware that this will need to be monitored carefully to ensure that the momentum and success the school is achieving is sustained.

Priorities for further improvement

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