

3 July 2008

Mrs Kirsty Haw
Executive Headteacher
Merton Bank Primary School
Roper Street
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 1EJ

Dear Mrs Haw

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

Following my visit with Eithne Proffitt, Additional Inspector, to your school on 1 and 2 July 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 June 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 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 third monitoring inspection: 1 and 2 July 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed lessons in each class, analysed pupils' work and a range of school documentation. Pupils' conduct was observed in various contexts and informal discussions were held with them. Discussions were held with the executive headteacher, the deputy headteacher and other staff. Two representatives from the governing body met with the lead inspector, as did the assistant director of education for St Helens.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection in March 2008 the headteacher has resigned. A headteacher from a local primary school has been appointed as executive headteacher for the foreseeable future. Consultation regarding a federation with the executive headteacher's own school is underway. An assistant headteacher has been seconded from a local school and is currently in school for approximately two days a week, this will increase to full-time in September 2008. One teacher has resigned and another has recently started a long-term leave of absence. One permanent teaching appointment has been made from within the school. An inclusion leader from the executive headteacher's own school is working between both schools to support the areas of safeguarding and extended school provision.

Achievement and standards

Recent initiatives and improvements to teaching and systems for assessment are beginning to improve pupils' learning. However, there is a significant legacy of underachievement that is hard to shift. Pupils have numerous gaps in their learning and standards remain low across the school in English, mathematics and science. Year 2 pupils have made steady progress since the last monitoring inspection but the negative effects of previously weak teaching and significant staffing disruptions are still evident. The statutory assessments of these pupils show that standards by the end of Year 2 are much lower than last year, especially in reading and writing. However, throughout the school, the foundations are being laid to raise standards and achievement through improved teaching and assessment. All pupils have recently undergone a series of assessments. Those undertaken by Key Stage 2 pupils are being externally marked to provide a validated reference point. The compilation of a comprehensive school database is already showing some evidence of the success of intervention programmes for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. However, an analysis of the progress of all pupils is restricted by the limited time the system has been operating. Whilst improvements to assessment systems are giving teachers increasing information about current levels of attainment, its accuracy and use remain inconsistent.

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

After the last monitoring inspection, pupils' behaviour deteriorated. This was noted by teaching and other staff, by parents and by pupils themselves. The school recognises that this remains a key priority and has stepped up its action to deal with unacceptable behaviour. Following a recent review of the behaviour policy, additional systems have been introduced to ensure pupils' conduct continues to improve. The majority of pupils are now keen to earn rewards and avoid sanctions. Most are increasingly eager to gain their teachers' approval because they recognise that teachers, whilst firm, treat them respectfully, work very hard at developing good relationships with them and empathise with their difficulties.

Although very challenging behaviour from a minority of pupils remains a significant concern, poor behaviour does not disrupt the vast majority of lessons. Most pupils continue to behave appropriately and reflect the improvements noted on earlier monitoring visits.

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 and learning is improving and becoming more consistent. Since the last monitoring inspection the proportion of good teaching has increased, with just fewer than half the lessons observed being of good quality. Teaching in Year 6 continues to be a significant strength. Satisfactory lessons now have more good features and inadequate teaching is being eradicated. Teachers' management of pupils' behaviour remains effective.

In the growing proportion of good lessons, teachers are more consistently successful at using what they know about the range of ability in their classes to match work accurately to pupils' different needs. This includes modifying questions so that they are pitched at just the right level to challenge all the pupils. Whilst all lessons are now appropriately structured at the planning stage to ensure a range of methods and activities for different abilities, in the good lessons, teachers are quick to adapt the planning to the situation. They recognise, for example, when pupils have listened for long enough, need additional support or challenge, or when customary methods of working need to be adjusted to maintain the pace of learning or diffuse unexpected behaviour issues. Another feature that distinguishes good lessons from satisfactory lessons is the quality and effectiveness of learning support assistants. In the better lessons, support clearly enhances both teaching and learning. Overall, however, learning assistants do not play a strong enough role during whole class sessions, either by working directly with pupils or in an assessment capacity.

Similarly, when leading group work there continue to be too many instances where support is not effective enough. The reasons for this vary but include assistants taking too passive a role, directing learning too rigidly and lacking the skills to reinforce, through explanation, demonstration and questioning, the key learning of the activities they are leading.

Throughout the school, better use is being made of ongoing assessment to inform teaching and learning. Teachers have begun to implement techniques that involve pupils in assessing their own learning, thereby giving them an insight into how well they are progressing. Marking, however, remains variable, particularly in how effectively it points pupils towards the next steps in improving their work.

A comprehensive new assessment system, designed to record standards and evaluate progress, has been established since the last monitoring inspection. This has the potential to inform target-setting. The target-setting process is in its infancy, however, and there are inconsistencies in the way teachers are using it. Numerical targets and national comparisons are just emerging, but only for booster groups. Statutory end of key stage targets are currently based on predictions rather than aspirational targets, although the new systems have the capacity to support more aspirational target-setting from entry to the Foundation Stage. Assessment information is being recorded systematically and a clear programme for assessing pupils has been put in place. However, the new systems have not been operational long enough to provide secure evidence about pupils' standards and rates of progress.

Whilst some improvements have been made to the provision for children in the Foundation Stage, overall this remains weak. Planning is much more detailed, covers all the areas of learning and makes provision for learning inside and outdoors. However, although a wealth of activities are planned and resourced, there are now no opportunities for children to initiate learning or to follow their own interests. Adults are wary of using the planning flexibly so they frequently over direct the activities and the children. For example, they often resolve problems that the children encounter, rather than allow or support them in doing this for themselves. Where adults take time to consider how and when to intervene to support learning, the children's learning is improved because they have time to explore creatively, apply new skills and hear good modelling of speech and language conventions. In return they are keen to engage in productive conversation. Assessment in the Foundation Stage remains inconsistent in its accuracy. Moreover, the current provision hinders useful improvement in assessment because it precludes observation of children demonstrating their skills in play they have initiated.

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

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

Leadership and management

Although the executive headteacher has only been at the school for a short time her impact has been marked. She has rapidly acquired an extremely accurate view of the school's work and has acted quickly to tackle some immediate weaknesses. The school's focus is now very securely on addressing the most important areas for improvement. Working with the senior management team, the executive headteacher has formulated a very clear strategy for improvement, capably focusing and prioritising action to achieve this without delay. Whilst maintaining a very high profile in all areas, the executive headteacher is challenging and empowering senior leaders and staff to develop their roles, thereby distributing and increasing the capacity for improvement. A notable shift in the culture and ethos of the school is very evident. The belief of staff, governors and parents that the school will now move forward at the pace needed is tangible and backed up by renewed drive and enthusiasm.

Since the last monitoring visit, more rigorous systems for checking and evaluating the school's work have been established. The pace, quantity and quality of this work has also improved. Whilst the executive headteacher is playing a key role, the senior leadership team are far more involved than previously in monitoring. Consequently, there is a shared and clearer view of the quality of provision. This is enabling sharper evaluation of strengths and weaknesses and informing action to raise standards and increase pupils' progress. The deputy headteacher has taken a leading role in developing the assessment systems and in monitoring and evaluation tasks. The previously noted confusion among the senior leadership team and other staff about their roles and responsibilities has been resolved. Weaknesses in communication at management level have been eradicated and communication has improved considerably.

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 local authority (LA) has provided a significant amount of external support since the last monitoring visit. For the most part the quality and impact of this has been very good and supported the school's improvement. The school improvement partner has played a key role in supporting the professional development of management staff, including helping them deal with some significant professional dilemmas. The LA's swift and decisive appointment of the executive headteacher ensured that the resignation of the previous headteacher had minimal impact at this crucial stage in the school's development.