

28 February 2008

The Headteacher
Spring Common School
American Lane
Huntingdon
Cambridgeshire
PE29 1TQ

Dear Ms Taylor

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF SPRING COMMON SCHOOL

Following my visit with Sue Aldridge and Eric Langford, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 27 and 28 February 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 November 2006. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good progress

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good progress

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed only after consultation with HMI.

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 governors and the Director of Children's Services for Cambridgeshire.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King

H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF SPRING COMMON SCHOOL

Report from the third monitoring inspection: 27 and 28 February 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the three assistant headteachers, five middle leaders, four governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection, three teachers have resigned and one teaching assistant has left. Two teachers and one senior leader are currently absent on long-term sick leave. Classes are being covered internally and by supply staff. Recent advertisements for posts at the school have elicited a positive response.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' progress has once again improved but remains too patchy. The school's information about the progress, which pupils are making in literacy and numeracy, indicates that most pupils are now making some progress in these areas. The school is aware that a small number of pupils are making little or no progress in these areas and have taken appropriate actions to remedy this. For example, in literacy at Key Stage 3, some pupils are receiving additional targeted support. However, while those making no progress are clearly identified, there is some lack of clarity among the leadership team about what constitutes satisfactory or better progress in the short term for individual pupils. In other areas of the curriculum, assessment information remains at an early stage of development and does not yet give a clear indication of the progress pupils are making. At Key Stage 4, pupils are making steady progress towards a range of accreditation, which represents an overall improvement in achievement at this key stage. The pupils with autism who were in the now disbanded class continue to make steady and sometimes good progress with their communication and social skills. In lessons observed during the inspection, pupils made at least satisfactory progress; in the best lessons they made good progress.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils enjoy coming to school, most concentrate well and pay good attention to their lessons. Attendance is good, however a small number of pupils taken out of school for family occasions lose valuable learning opportunities. Pupils' behaviour is good and sometimes outstanding. In discussion, pupils made it clear to inspectors that they considered good behaviour to be the norm in school and that bullying was not an issue. In lessons, good behaviour made a positive contribution to pupils' progress. Relationships between pupils and staff are very positive and pupils react well to the challenges presented to them in lessons. This was exemplified in a Year 10 mathematics lesson where each pupil was challenged by the teacher in an exciting learning environment and a pupil with complex needs rose to the occasion to feedback his results at the end of the lesson. In the upper school, pupils appreciate

the recent changes that have been made to lunchtimes, which enable different age groups to eat and use the playground separately and therefore to have more age appropriate activities. Pupils are very keen to plan and implement actions to improve their school. A school council was elected last term but pupils are disappointed that there has only been one meeting. The school has recently developed some interesting lunchtime activities, including a drama club and a cycling club.

Quality of provision

Good progress has been made in improving the quality of teaching. More good lessons were observed than during the previous visit and two lessons were outstanding. The planning format has been appropriately adapted to make teaching assistants' (TAs) roles clearer and to ensure that planning matches the work to pupils' abilities. Staff have responded well to this change. As a result, planning was at least satisfactory in almost all lessons. Improved planning has had a positive impact on the deployment of staff and therefore on the attention pupils receive and the progress they make in lessons. Occasionally, teachers briefed TAs during, rather than before the lessons, which slowed the pace of learning. Learning objectives are still too variable in quality.

In several of the satisfactory lessons, the planning was adequate but teachers were hampered by their lack of subject knowledge or their knowledge of the group. This highlights a need for careful training and support when teachers are new to a group or a curriculum area. Good lessons were well planned to meet the needs of different groups of learners; they were interesting and well paced and engaged all pupils well. As at the time of the previous monitoring inspection, the outstanding lessons were characterised by the teachers' exceptional knowledge of the pupils' needs, which they used to plan meticulously, by their very high expectations, and by the way in which each adult in the class was thoroughly focused on ensuring that pupils were making good progress. In most lessons the progress and participation of pupils with complex needs was assisted by the appropriate use of communication aids and signing, although this is still not completely consistent. Staff's persistence and confidence in including all pupils has improved: where pupils occasionally tried to resist an activity, consistent management of their behaviour ensured that they took part and therefore made satisfactory progress.

The targets that have been set for pupils in literacy and numeracy have been moderated and are now more aspirational. Teachers are using these appropriately to inform their planning. Termly assessment weeks give useful information about progress in these curriculum areas, and assessment in other subjects is developing steadily, but this information is not yet used rigorously enough to evaluate whether pupils are making satisfactory progress on a short-term basis. The rewriting of individual education plans is at an early stage but they are well designed to assist teachers in focusing on the wider progress that pupils are making.

The introduction of a systematic phonics (letter sounds) programme at Key Stages 1, 2 and part of Key Stage 3 is a positive development which teachers report is already starting to have some impact on pupils' reading skills and motivation. The development of the English and mathematics curricula continues to be well focused.

There is a clear impact on staff's practice and in many cases on pupils' progress. Positive developments have begun in several other curriculum areas.

The additional multi agency support which the LA had purchased at the time of the previous visit has ceased. Over the past year the school has taken a range of positive steps to ensure that pupils' health, physical and communication needs are met. However, specialist health services are still not frequent enough. This hampers the timely assessment of pupils' needs and too often prevents the school from being sufficiently responsive to the needs of pupils, especially those who are new. This has caused some concern to parents. The Primary Care Trust are carrying out an audit of the school's needs with a view to identifying the perceived shortfalls in provision and taking appropriate action.

In September, the school established an Early Years class for pupils in the Foundation Stage and Year 1. Links with nurseries and a Children's Centre support children's move to the school. The curriculum covers all the required areas of learning, with a suitable emphasis on communication and self-help skills. It is supplemented adequately by additional therapies, such as physiotherapy and sensory integration. The objectives on pupils' statements are broadly met, but the extent to which individual needs are met in lessons is not yet secure as personalised objectives, such as those from pupils' individual education plans, are not linked into lesson plans. However, plans do identify different objectives for groups of different abilities. The outdoor area has a suitable safety surface, with equipment to encourage physical development, although there is no grassed area. In the absence of the regular teacher, a supply teacher is being supported by members of the leadership team. High levels of adult support and care are provided, but not all staff are fully trained in their roles.

The appointment of a manager for Post-16 has been a significant development since the last visit. She has already breathed new life into the curriculum so that it is broader, more work-related and better matched to the needs of the students. A range of link courses at local colleges provides valuable opportunities for students to learn skills, socialise and develop independence. These are having a discernible and positive impact on students' enjoyment, self-esteem and social skills. All Post-16 students have the opportunity to achieve some external recognition for their achievements, and the school is aware of the need to consider further opportunities for accreditation. Staff in Post-16 know the students well, and use their knowledge to plan suitably challenging tasks, although they do not always stretch the most able students enough. In general, adults manage students well, so they are fully engaged in the tasks set for them. Good personal care is provided for those students that need this. Comprehensive risk assessments are carried out for activities such as off-site visits, but occasionally teachers do not document their assessment of risks in lessons, so that precautions to be taken are not clear to support staff.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2006:

- As a matter of urgency address staff training and monitoring of procedures to ensure the management of behaviour is at least satisfactory at all times – good progress
- Improve the quality of teaching and ensure effective assessment so that all pupils can make the best possible progress – good progress

Leadership and management

The headteacher has continued her drive for significant improvement, to good effect. The new staffing structure has been fully implemented which has enabled all teachers, teaching assistants and support staff to have a clear role. An emphasis within this structure on teamwork and team leadership has been welcomed by staff and has begun to have a positive effect on work in the classroom and on wider developments, such as the provision of physiotherapy and speech therapy support. The structure also provides a firm basis for performance management. The headteacher remains the principle driver for strategic change. However, as senior leaders are becoming more confident and competent in their roles, the headteacher is devolving more responsibility to them for development as well as for day-to-day management. The school runs smoothly on a day to day-to-day basis.

Since the previous monitoring visit, senior leaders have formed a more cohesive and better focused team. Importantly, they are also developing a greater understanding of the interrelationship between their roles and how this contributes to the overall process of school improvement. Their leadership of their areas of responsibility has improved. Relevant pieces of work have been carried out to improve the quality of teaching and learning. For example, leaders investigated the way in which TAs supported pupils. This led to an appropriate analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses in this area, and suitable actions have been taken, which have had an impact on classroom organisation. Written monitoring documents do not always reflect sharp evaluations, although leaders can articulate reasonably clearly the impact of their work, especially the most recent developments.

The school's middle leaders, two of whom are newly appointed to their roles, are a growing strength. Their good and outstanding teaching provides a valuable role model for other staff. Literacy, numeracy and communication leaders are becoming increasingly confident and accurate in their monitoring of other staff's work. Work to improve pupils' individual education plans is well thought out. Highly focused leadership of Post-16 since the start of the spring term has already resulted in significant improvements in the quality of provision and suitable plans are in place for further development.

Leadership of other subject areas is at an early stage of development and several posts are unfilled. However, where subject leaders are in place they have received support from the LA and begun to scrutinise the quality of pupils' work. Their development plans include a range of suitable actions, however the clarity of the way in which impact will be monitored and evaluated is variable.

The governing body continues to be dedicated to the school and to supporting its improvement. They have experienced continued difficulties in recruiting the full

number of parent governors, but are making good links with parents through workshops and social events. The governing body does not always receive the information they need to be able to provide the school with suitable challenge in a timely or accessible enough way. Some policies do not have a sufficient emphasis on reflecting the school's current practice and identifying individual staff's roles and responsibilities associated with the operation and monitoring of these policies.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in November 2006:

- Establish regular monitoring and rigorous evaluation so that there is a clear view of strengths and areas for development across the school – satisfactory progress
- Refine leadership and management roles so that there are clear lines of accountability to ensure policy is consistently implemented – good progress

External support

The LA has provided a range of appropriate support for the school. This has been effective in supporting the development of middle and subject leaders. In particular, it has enabled subject leaders to begin to monitor the quality of pupils' work. Importantly, the LA provided specialist training for its own consultants prior to their visits to the school to develop their knowledge of pupils with severe and profound multiple learning difficulties. The school improvement partner has provided an important monitoring role but has also given valuable support and challenge to the headteacher and a number of other leaders. The LA has given careful consideration to the support it will provide for the school in the next year and the draft plans are suitably tailored to the school's needs. The LA has recently secured the support of an experienced headteacher from a primary school to develop further the skills and capacity of the senior leaders.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that staff receive training and support when working outside their areas of expertise.
- Clearly define what constitutes satisfactory progress for each pupil across the curriculum, including in their personal development, on a short term as well as long term basis.
- Develop a tracking system, which is evaluative and clearly indicates interventions to be made as a result of any underachievement.
- Ensure that governors receive all the information they need in an accessible and timely way in order to be able to monitor thoroughly the school's compliance with all statutory requirements as well as the school's overall progress and development.