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Mrs Julie Bowman (Executive Head)
Blyth Horton Grange First School
Kitty Brewster
Blyth
Northumberland
NE24 4RE

Dear Mrs Bowman

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF BLYTH HORTON GRANGE FIRST SCHOOL

Following my visit with Mary Sewell Additional Inspector, to your school on 29 and 30 April 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in November 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate progress

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 Child Services for Northumberland LA.

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF BLYTH HORTON GRANGE FIRST SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 29 and 30 April 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including 15 part lessons and two assemblies. Documents were scrutinised and meetings held with the executive headteacher, the senior leadership team, staff, pupils and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the last inspection the substantive headteacher has retired and the acting headteacher has returned to her own school. The school is now in a 'soft' federation with Malvin's Close First School, a national support school. The headteacher of Malvin's Close is now the executive headteacher of both schools. An associate assistant headteacher has been seconded from the same school. The governing body has been replaced by an interim executive board (IEB). Two teachers have retired and others are absent from school. During the visit four classes were taught by temporary or supply staff. The school will become a primary school from September 2009.

Achievement and standards

Standards are below average and pupils do not achieve as well as they should. This is because teaching is not good enough. Children make good progress in Nursery but this is not maintained in the rest of the school. The school's own analysis of data and its predictions for the attainment of those pupils currently in Year 2 indicate that there has been little improvement from previous years. Work seen during the visit confirms that the attainment of pupils in Years 1 to 4 is well below that expected for their age. Data from recently completed reading tests shows that only 20% of pupils in Year 4 have a reading age which is in-line with or above their actual age and that almost 40% of the year group are at least two years behind in their reading, most of these pupils are boys. While the school is to be commended for carrying out these tests, a marked lack of urgency in evaluating the results and in sharing these with class teachers means that this has not yet resulted in better outcomes for pupils. Standards are particularly low in writing because pupils have too few opportunities to write at length. Handwriting and the presentation of work are generally poor and most pupils struggle to use anything but the most basic punctuation. The school is taking action to improve spelling but in some classes this is not well enough linked to work in lessons. Although achievement is slightly better in mathematics many pupils do not have instant recall of number bonds and tables and this prevents them from dealing with new learning effectively. The school accepts that it has not done enough to raise standards, improve achievement and tackle the growing legacy of underachievement.

The provision made for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is improving; however, their achievement remains inadequate. Pupils with emotional

and behavioural difficulties are well supported by a 'Place2Be' and a 'Place2Talk' and, for some, by inclusion in the nurture group. This combined with much improved whole-school systems to promote good behaviour means that the proportion of pupils identified as having emotional or behavioural difficulties has reduced significantly in recent months. Pupils with learning difficulties are initially identified by teacher assessment. Until recently there were few formal systems to accurately identify underachievement. As a result some pupils with learning difficulties do not receive the necessary support and even when support is provided this often fails to identify their most pressing needs. Pupils are usually supported by teaching assistants in lessons. While this support is useful few pupils receive work which is accurately matched to their needs so their progress is inadequate.

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

- Raise standards in English and mathematics. – inadequate
- Make better provision to support pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. – inadequate

Personal development and well-being

The school, with the help of the LA, has acted promptly and effectively to improve behaviour. During the visit behaviour in classrooms and around the school was good. Pupils know what is expected of them and teachers apply strategies to promote good behaviour consistently and to good effect. Pupils are pleased that the school is now a happier and safer place. They like being a 'Horton Hero' and welcome the fact that all their achievements are recognised. The executive headteacher promotes courtesy, helpfulness and self-esteem and this is having a very positive impact on pupils. Assemblies and playtimes are very pleasant occasions and pupils are responding well to new opportunities. They are enthusiastic about after-school clubs and enjoy taking part in activities outside school; singing at 'ASDA' appears to have been particularly enjoyable. Although pupils say they enjoy school attendance remains below average. The school has systems in place to promote better attendance and a corridor display helps to promote healthy competition between classes.

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

- Establish a uniform system to improve the behaviour of pupils. – good

Quality of provision

Much of the teaching seen during the visit was satisfactory but a significant amount was inadequate. Learning is inadequate. Few pupils make sufficiently swift progress to compensate for the weaknesses in basic skills that limit their attainment in day-to-day work, as well as in national tests and assessments. Teaching and learning in the Foundation Stage are more effective than in other year groups but there are inconsistencies between classes

Lesson planning is unsatisfactory. Teachers plan lessons carefully taking note of all the guidance they have received. Lessons have a clear structure and learning

objectives and success criteria are shared with pupils. While this is a very positive step forward it does little to improve learning because lesson planning is not based upon accurate up-to-date assessment information. As a result, lesson plans based on national guidance are not sufficiently well adapted to the needs of particular classes or individuals and teachers do not 'think through planning carefully enough to ensure that learning is effective. Some pupils, for example, could make rapid progress in mathematics but struggle to complete tasks because they cannot read questions or instructions. The school has recently implemented a system to track the progress made by pupils. However, the data used to make these calculations is not always accurate because staff are not experienced enough in marking tests and assessments and making judgements. Where accurate data is available it has not been shared with teachers quickly enough to improve outcomes for pupils. The school does not set challenging targets and pupils do not know how well they are achieving or what they must do to improve. They do not have individual targets in all classes or subjects. All books are marked but not all marking tells pupils how to improve. In some classes marking is constructive but does not help pupils make progress because they are not given time to act upon the advice given.

The pace of many lessons is very slow. Pupils spend too long being talked to by the teacher and have too little time to do their own work or develop their thinking. Although children sit in groups they work as individuals and have few opportunities to discuss their ideas with others. In a small number of classes, teachers are trying to help pupils become self evaluative but opportunities to develop this are not always well judged. Teachers have benefited from the coaching and mentoring provided by the executive headteacher and her team but they do not receive enough well targeted feedback about the effectiveness of their work to help them improve further.

The executive headteacher has ensured that pupils receive their full entitlement to the curriculum. However, the curriculum has not been adapted well enough to ensure that opportunities tackle underachievement are maximised. While the introduction of food technology has helped the school improve resources the introduction of a new subject at this time is ill advised, it is deflecting time and attention away from those subjects that need it most.

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

- Improve the quality of teaching and the curriculum, in particular to encourage more involvement of pupils in their learning – inadequate

Leadership and management

A period of change following the last inspection limited the progress initially made by the school in tackling the areas for improvement. The appointment of a new executive headteacher and interim executive board (IEB) together with other changes at middle and senior leadership level have taken time to complete. Since February, the executive headteacher has provided purposeful leadership. She has worked with staff, parents and the wider community and has developed a positive ethos within the school. A number of small but important improvements have been made and the school is now well placed to move forward. However, despite the good

progress made in improving behaviour the pace of improvement has been too slow and a great deal remains to be done. The IEB has made an effective start. Minutes of meetings indicate that the board acts as a critical friend and is holding the school to account.

The roles of senior and middle managers are underdeveloped. Senior leaders have too much responsibility for managing subjects and too little responsibility for leading aspects of the improvement process. Because they lack clear roles and responsibilities, too much time is spent in completing and repeating tasks which have little impact on pupil progress and those actions which would make most difference are completed very slowly or not at all.

Plans made to improve the school do not provide the leadership team and other staff with sufficient clear and robust guidance. Although a great many actions are identified these are not prioritised and it is not clear how the effectiveness of the actions taken will be judged. Most of the responsibility for improvement appears to lie with the executive headteacher. There are no interim milestones by which to measure progress or hold all staff, including middle and senior leaders, fully accountable for their actions in the short- and medium-term. The school is not sufficiently evaluative. Judgements made about the effectiveness of its work are too generous and it does not systematically monitor the impact of the actions taken.

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

- Improve the leadership and management of the school at all levels.— inadequate

External support

The LA recognised that although the statement of action meets requirements and is satisfactory overall it does not fully meet the changing needs of the school. The statement of action has now been developed and provides a clear plan of the actions the LA will take to aid the school's recovery. The LA has provided a great deal of time, support and funding to the school but this support has not yet had the necessary impact. LA monitoring is regular, rigorous and helpful to the school. It provides a clear and coherent overview of the impact of the actions which have been taken and correctly identifies next steps. The LA is committed to maintaining high levels of support for the school to improve the capacity of staff at all levels and to tackle, with urgency, the issues which remain and the additional burdens resulting from reorganisation and building work.

The school improvement partner is an 'effective critical friend' to the school. He monitors the implementation of the statement of action and its impact and offers constructive advice and guidance to the senior team.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards and improve the achievement of all pupils by focusing rigorously on the main issues identified in the inspection report of November 2007.

- Use accurate assessment data to plan work which meets the needs of individual pupils.
- Implement systems to monitor and evaluate the impact of the actions taken to bring about improvement.
- Increase the pace of school improvement activities and ensure that all staff recognise the urgency of the situation.