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16 July 2008

Miss E Smith
The Headteacher
Squirrel Hayes First School
Springfield Road
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ST8 7DF

Dear Miss Smith

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF SQUIRREL HAYES FIRST SCHOOL

Following my visit with Rodney Braithwaite, Additional Inspector, to your school on 9 and 10 July 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth 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 – 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 to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director of Children & Lifelong Learning for Staffordshire.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Watters
Her Majesty's Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF SQUIRREL HAYES FIRST SCHOOL

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection: 9 and 10 July 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, assistant headteacher, the literacy and numeracy coordinators, the teacher in charge of the Foundation Stage, the chair of governors and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection an administrative assistant has joined the school. At the end of the summer term the Year 3 teacher will be leaving to take up another teaching post within the local authority. At the same time, a teaching assistant will also be leaving. The governors have increased the hours of a part time teacher so that she can teach the Year 3 pupils in the autumn term. From the beginning of the autumn term 2008, the headteacher will take on the role of the special educational needs (SEN) coordinator, on a temporary basis, supported by the SEN teaching assistant.

Achievement and standards

The school's assessment information shows that pupils' progress is accelerating. The gap between what the pupils are currently attaining and the levels they should be reaching for their age is narrowing more rapidly than in the past. Around 70% of the pupils are making satisfactory and better progress, with an increasing proportion of pupils making good progress. Standards are rising, also at a speedier rate. In May just over half the pupils were working at the level for their age. The school expects this to rise to 68%, following the completion of assessments in July. Work in pupils' books generally supports the more positive picture shown by the school's assessments, although there are inconsistencies in writing books, where weaknesses in spelling, punctuation and grammar persist. Similarly, some of the levels awarded are not always supported by the quality of the pupils' day to day work, particularly in writing.

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

- raise standards and increase rates of pupils' progress – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils are well behaved and have positive attitudes. They enjoy talking about their work, and are open and easy in conversation with visitors and each other. The quality of relationships between adults and pupils is consistently good. Pupils feel very safe and secure and enjoy coming to school.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning has improved. While most is satisfactory and some is good, there are still occasions in a small minority of lessons where inadequate teaching continues to impede the pupils' progress. In the best lessons, relationships are good, expectations are high, and questions are used effectively to probe the pupils' understanding and challenge their thinking. There is a brisk pace of learning and teaching assistants are deployed effectively to teach small groups and support individuals who find learning difficult. Teachers use assessments well to identify gaps in the pupils' learning, and then provide work which helps the pupils learn new skills and consolidate their understanding. In the weaker lessons, the pace of learning is too slow, the pupils' work is not matched well enough to their different learning needs and the teachers' instructions and explanations confuse the pupils, who are unsure about what they are expected to do. Similarly, pupils are kept for too long in lesson introductions and there is insufficient use of examples to show the pupils what they should be achieving.

The curriculum has been amended to take account of the pupils' different starting points and capabilities. Teachers use assessment information to revise their medium term and weekly plans, taking into account what the pupils know, understand and can do. There is a stronger focus on the skills pupils need to learn, particularly in literacy and numeracy lessons. Teachers are also giving more attention to improving writing and mathematical understanding in other subjects during afternoon lessons. These actions have improved the quality of lesson planning, although inconsistencies in the quality of teaching remain. Similarly, the quality of teachers' marking is too variable. While good marking shows pupils what they need to do next to improve, some of the written marking is too generous, fails to correct errors, and does not provide sufficient help for pupils to get better in their work.

Significant improvements have been made to the quality of teaching and learning in the Nursery class. The classroom has been reorganised into a calm and ordered learning environment. Resources, including books and practical materials, are stored in an orderly manner and are easily accessible to support the children's learning. Adults work effectively with individuals and small groups of children to improve key skills in literacy and numeracy. Relationships are good. The links with the Reception class, both in planning and teaching strategies, are productive and generally effective. In both classes there is a calm start to the day, with a good focus on improving children's social skills. The quality of pastoral care and support is at least satisfactory, and some is good, shown by the adult and child conversations during morning snack time. Nevertheless, there are some weaknesses that still persist. While planning has improved it is not always clear what children are expected to learn during independent activities when they choose their own tasks. Similarly, there are missed opportunities to improve children's speaking and listening skills, and often children spend too long without sufficient adult intervention.

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

- improve the quality of teaching so that all pupils are suitably challenged and their differing needs are met – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The inadequacies in management, identified at the last monitoring inspection, have been tackled successfully and eliminated. Procedures for recruiting staff and awarding pay rises follow best practice and local authority guidelines. The role of the governors' finance and personnel committees has been strengthened to ensure that all decisions relating to staffing and spending the school's budget must be approved by these committees.

Monitoring and evaluation are secure. The headteacher's evaluation of progress is detailed and generally accurate. She has ensured that the focus on raising standards and achievement is central to the school's improvement, and is rigorously pursuing a better quality of education for all pupils. Subject leaders and the assistant headteacher are taking a more positive role in the school's improvement and leading developments in their areas of responsibility. Subject action plans and the school improvement plan provide a sound basis for further development.

There is a rigorous programme to monitor the quality of teaching and learning, including observing lessons, checking planning, and scrutinising the pupils' books. Written feedback to teachers is generally helpful and makes clear when teachers are expected to make improvements. However, there is still insufficient focus on evaluating the impact of teachers' work in relation to the pupils' progress in lessons. This usually relates to the progress made by different groups of pupils and the effectiveness of teaching in ensuring a brisk pace of learning for all pupils.

The analysis of assessment information is very thorough. It identifies rates of progress in reading, writing and mathematics and the standards reached by the pupils. The information is used to hold teachers to account, tackle underachievement, and set targets for further improvement. This is clearly an important step forward. While the school's assessments have been moderated by the LA, there are some examples of over generous assessments of pupils' written work, which affect the accuracy of the school's analysis. The headteacher recognises the importance of ensuring that teachers' assessments are accurate, fair and reliable, and consistently supported by the quality of the pupils' work.

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

- more rigorously evaluate and monitor the school's work to bring about rapid improvement – satisfactory.

External support

Following the previous monitoring inspection the LA moved swiftly to tackle weaknesses in management. Two senior officers were appointed to the governing body, which strengthened the school's capacity for improvement. A good range of training and support for governors has improved their role in holding the school to account. The coaching and training provided by a consultant teacher has made a significantly positive difference in the Foundation Stage. Generally satisfactory support has been provided to moderate and validate the school's assessments.