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Mr P Talbot
The Headteacher
Castle Hill Community Primary School
Sidney Street
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Kent
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Dear Mr Talbot

Fresh Start: Monitoring Inspection of Castle Hill Community Primary School

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 20 and 21 May 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school opened in January 2007.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

During the visit the inspector carried out lesson observations with the two assistant headteachers. Seven parts of lessons were observed. A range of documents were scrutinised and meetings were held with members of the senior leadership team, the chair of governors, pupils, and the School Improvement Partner. Samples of pupils' work were also looked at.

Context

The number of pupils on the school roll is rising and currently stands at 370, including those in the nursery. Staffing remains stable. A Czech speaker has been employed for 10 hours a week to provide additional support for those pupils who join the school and speak little or no English. An attendance officer provides support on a daily basis. There is one vacancy on the governing body. A substantial building project is planned. The first part of this project is due to commence in July.

Achievement and standards

The school's own regular assessments identify that standards are beginning to rise. However, school leaders are aware that standards and achievement remain too low. They are not complacent and have taken appropriate action since the previous monitoring visit to accelerate achievement. For example, the progress that every pupil is expected to make year on year has been increased. The system to track this progress has been refined and there is now a more detailed analysis of the data available. As a result, the identification of groups of pupils and individuals who are underachieving is more robust. The school now has a clear baseline against which to evaluate the impact of the actions being taken to raise standards and achievement and improve the quality of teaching and learning. The school's tracking information indicates that some additional support is having a positive impact but that inconsistencies remain across subjects, year groups and for some groups of pupils, including the more able. These inconsistencies were also evident in the lessons observed. Pupils made satisfactory or better progress in the majority of lessons seen. Inadequate progress was made in three lessons because pupils were not provided with sufficiently challenging tasks or guidance to maintain the pace of learning.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in January 2008:

- use assessment and tracking information more robustly to accelerate the progress pupils make – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

The specific, daily time now given to the work of the attendance officer, in addition to the other range of strategies to improve attendance, is having a positive impact. Although it remains below the national average, attendance has risen since the previous monitoring visit by 2%. A Czech speaker has been employed to support these families and letters about attendance and punctuality are translated into their home language. The attendance of this group of pupils has risen by 3%, although it too remains below the national average.

The behaviour policy is implemented effectively and fewer behavioural incidents are being reported to the senior leaders. The number of exclusions has fallen further, and there have been no permanent exclusions since the previous monitoring visit. Pupils generally have good attitudes to learning and respond positively to the adults who work with them. However, some pupils say they would like to be challenged more as some of their work is too easy.

In the Reception class there are excellent opportunities for children to develop their independence. As a result, they are confident, happy, and work productively on their own and with others. Concentration levels are good and the children happily make choices about tasks they want to complete. This good start is not built on effectively as pupils move through the school because there are missed opportunities for pupils to take responsibility for their learning during lessons. For example, in some lessons,

pupils were not given choices about the resources they could use and sat passively whilst adults gave them out.

Quality of provision

The school monitors the quality of lessons and pupils' work systematically. Its records indicate that almost all lessons are satisfactory or better with an increasing proportion that is good, although this was not evident in lessons seen during the monitoring visit. Of the seven lessons seen, three were satisfactory and one was outstanding. Observations carried out by HMI in conjunction with senior leaders indicate that they are able to accurately identify the strengths and areas that need development in a lesson. They are also aware that learning needs to be consistently good if all pupils are to achieve as well as they should and reach the standards expected.

In a typical lesson the learning intentions and success criteria are shared, planning identifies different ability groups, and information and communication technology (ICT) is used appropriately to engage pupils who are generally keen to participate. In the outstanding lesson pupils made excellent progress in their learning because tasks were varied, engaged and interested them by providing them with practical opportunities to apply their learning. The learning objective was clearly linked to the tasks and constantly reinforced through the very effective questions adults asked of pupils. This challenged pupils very well to extend their learning and explain their ideas. Teaching assistants were well deployed and had a clear learning focus to their support in all parts of the lesson. This excellent practice is not consistent throughout the school.

In some lessons the learning objective and success criteria lacked clarity so pupils were unsure of what they were learning and how they could judge their achievement. The pace of learning slowed in too many lessons when there was over direction by the teacher and opportunities were missed for pupils to develop their independence and share or develop their ideas with each other. Tasks did not provide appropriate challenge or sufficient variety to ensure all pupils were actively engaged and making the progress they should.

The involvement of additional adults during the teacher led part of the lesson has increased, but this is not consistently well planned or focused on pupils' particular learning needs and this limits the progress some pupils make. The quality of marking seen in pupils books has improved. There is a revised marking policy which places a stronger emphasis on providing pupils with information about their achievement of the learning objective and their next steps in learning. An increase in the use of developmental comments to support learning is evident; such marking is generally better in literacy than in other subjects. Pupils are aware of their targets for literacy and numeracy but these are not referred to consistently in lessons or in marking. The pupils know that, as part of the school's assessment cycle, their attainment levels are reported to their parents. This information includes the levels they might be expected to achieve, but those who were already at or above the nationally expected level were unclear about what improvement was expected of them.

The curriculum was not looked at in depth during this visit but the school has carried out a well-being and involvement survey with pupils to evaluate their engagement with the International Primary Curriculum the school has adopted. The survey identified that most pupils are participating well.

Intervention and support are now being targeted more specifically to a wider group of pupils identified through the modified tracking system as underachieving. Pupil progress meetings are held regularly to monitor progress and evaluate the impact of the additional support. As this is relatively new the evaluation is still at the early stages. The early evaluation of the literacy and numeracy interventions shows that these have increased the rate of progress for some pupils but there are inconsistencies between different year groups. The weekly targeted support for those pupils who are at the early stages of English language acquisition is also having a positive impact, but the links between this and the day to day teaching in the classroom are not yet embedded.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in January 2008:

- increase the pace of learning and the level of challenge in lessons for all pupils, particularly the more able – inadequate.

Leadership and management

The strategic vision of the headteacher, senior leaders and governors has become more sharply focused on increasing the rate of progress pupils make and this has raised expectations. They have been diligent in putting in place measures to address the points raised at the previous monitoring visit. Tracking systems have been modified to identify more clearly pupils who are not making progress, monitoring has been modified to follow up any inadequate lessons quickly, and the weekly scrutiny of pupils' books now involves the subject leader. However, the focus of these activities, the recording of the outcomes and how these outcomes are shared with staff need a sharper focus on learning to secure the sustained and consistent improvement in the quality of teaching and learning required to accelerate progress.

Middle managers' understanding of the standards and achievement in their subjects throughout the school is improving. The middle managers are being given increased opportunities to develop their leadership skills, but senior managers recognise that there is more work to be done to embed the role of subject leaders in driving improvement. The area identified for improvement during the previous monitoring visit remains relevant.

Improvement plans have been modified to include some quantifiable measures of success, but this needs to be developed further if all staff are to have a clear understanding of the link between achievement, classroom practice and how they are held to account for the progress pupils make.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in January 2008:

- ensure planning for improvement and evaluation is sharply focused on achievement and how it will be measured – satisfactory
- develop the leadership of middle managers so that they have an impact on improving achievement, teaching and learning – satisfactory.

External support

The headteacher, senior leaders and governors work collaboratively with the local authority and other partners. Their willingness to act on advice given is having a positive impact on the progress the school is making. The School Improvement Partner is providing clear challenge and support to accelerate the pace of change and help senior leaders build the capacity for improvement at all levels.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of good or better lessons by ensuring there is a clear focus on learning in planning and monitoring.
- Provide opportunities for pupils to develop their independence and take responsibility for their learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Kent.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline Krafft
H M Inspector of Schools