

Prospects Learning Services
Prospects Services LTD
19 Elmfield Road
Bromley
Kent
BR1 1LT

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 020 8315 1250
Direct F 020 8315 1279



27 June 2008

Mr Mike Edwards
The Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
Pyle Hill
Newbury
RG14 7SJ

Dear Mr Edwards,

Fresh Start: Monitoring Inspection of The Willows Primary School

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 18 and 19 June 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 opened in April 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

The inspector observed the school's work including lessons, scrutinised documents and met with: the headteacher; the transition headteacher; the director of children's services in West Berkshire; two members of the governing body, including the chair of governors; two parents; a group of pupils; and a group of staff.

Context

The number of pupils on roll is 196 and this is broadly similar to the figure at the time of the closure of Greenham Court Primary School, the predecessor school. An adviser from the local authority led the predecessor school from September to November 2006. A transition headteacher took over the running of the predecessor school and then led the new school until the substantive headteacher took up his post just under two months ago. The transition headteacher still contributes approximately two days a week to ease the transfer of responsibilities and complete some work on assessment. Two teachers from the predecessor school are employed in the new school. A building project to remodel and enhance the school's interior is in progress. It started in April 2008 and is expected to be completed in September 2008.

Achievement and standards

The school has established a secure platform from which to raise standards, most notably in ensuring that pupils have positive attitudes to school, behave well in the main, respect teachers' authority and value the staff's efforts to support them. Many members of the school community, including pupils, parents and staff, speak with pride and relief that much has been done over the last year to improve the atmosphere and create a sense of purpose, security and calm.

Results of national tests taken in the summer of 2007, during the first term of the school's existence, were exceptionally low and showed that pupils had made inadequate progress. Results in 2007 were lower than in 2006 in the predecessor school and continued the downward trend that had led to the local authority to take action. The Willows School is showing that the downward trend is being reversed. Results in 2008 are expected to show a significant improvement although they are likely to be well below national averages at both Key Stages. Whilst the school can demonstrate that pupils' progress is improving, there is still much to do to narrow the gap between pupils' current levels of attainment and what might typically be expected of them given their ages and starting points.

Many children enter the school with skills that are well below those expected for their ages. In the Foundation Stage, they make satisfactory progress in their personal, social development and mathematical development. Progress in communication, language and literacy, however, is still generally weak other than for the most able children.

Throughout the school, pupils' speaking skills are low in most cases, and relatively few pupils answer questions fully and confidently. Most pupils respond in single words or brief phrases and staff are rightly working to improve pupils' speaking skills. Written work shows many shortcomings in handwriting, spelling and sentence construction. Relatively few pupils attain above expected levels for their ages in the older year groups but increasing numbers do so in the younger classes. Pupils' writing books and other records show that progress in reading and writing is being made at a faster rate than in the past. A similar picture pertains in mathematics where standards for many older pupils are below expected levels. In science, major shortcomings in past provision have resulted in gaps in pupils' knowledge and understanding. Teachers are beginning to address these weaknesses, particularly in relation to investigative work.

The school's concerted efforts to identify and provide for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are bearing fruit. As a result of good support the reading ages of some of the weakest readers are improving. Pupils with English as an additional language, relatively few in number, are supported well and settle in quickly.

Personal development and well-being

The impact of much good work to lift pupils' sense of well-being is clearly visible in the positive attitudes most pupils have to school. Pupils mention good behaviour as one of the best things about the school; behaviour has been foremost in their minds as helping or impeding learning. They say 'teachers are stricter now' and 'they will help us'. It is clear that good relationships, well-established routines, and consistently applied system of rewards and penalties provide pupils with a great sense of security. Pupils want to learn and succeed. More than one previously troublesome pupil is reported as saying 'I am good now'. Although behaviour is generally good, there are a few troubled and vulnerable pupils who occasionally disrupt learning for themselves or others. The school works with great sensitivity to support these pupils. Attendance has improved this year but is still below the national average.

Staff have worked and are working to promote pupils' self-esteem, resilience and enjoyment of school. The school seeks to offer opportunities for pupils to identify and develop their areas of interest and strength, and to recognise and experience success. The outcomes of these efforts can be seen in pupils' pride in their achievements and delight when good work and behaviour are recognised. The recently won sports trophies are a source of pride. Music is developing as an area of enjoyment. The school worked extensively last summer so that pupils moving onto secondary school were given the best possible support and guidance to make that move smoothly and get off to a good start; it will do so again this year. Pupils have a good understanding of how to live healthy lives because of much good work in this area. The school is hoping to achieve Healthy School status shortly.

Quality of provision

Lessons are at least satisfactory and many are good. However, there are inconsistencies in the quality of teaching in relation to the pace of learning, the good use of questioning to probe pupils' understanding, in ensuring pupils' maximum involvement through a range of techniques, and in the enriching of topics through good resources and links across subjects. Teachers are clear that good progress in lessons is required to catch up on past underachievement. Lesson planning places a proper emphasis on developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Not all tasks set build well enough upon the pupils' prior knowledge. Teaching assistants make a positive contribution in most lessons but are sometimes not briefed well enough by teachers so as to maximise their impact on pupils' progress. Teachers report that this year has seen improvements in pupils' confidence in having a go at free writing, whereas in the past many pupils preferred not to try for fear of making mistakes. This typifies pupils' generally improved confidence and attitudes to work and learning that are having a positive impact on raising achievement and standards.

Information and communication technology is used well by most teachers. Pupils' use of computers is rather limited and expected to increase on completion of the building project that will provide a new computer suite and allow for some computers to be placed in classrooms. The school is aware that provision for science had major

shortcomings in the past and that much still needs to be done to raise standards in this subject.

The school seeks constantly to ensure that all pupils are included in all aspects of school life. Care is taken to identify individual pupils' needs and work is in progress to check that educational provision matches these needs; much of it already does.

Good systems for assessing pupils' work, recording their attainment and progress, and analysing the data were established under the leadership of the transition headteacher. The school is in a good position to track pupils' progress although some systems are now ready to be further streamlined for greater efficiency in analysis. In some lessons, teachers give good oral or written feedback on pupils' work. However, not all staff provide appropriate guidance to pupils on how well they are doing and how to improve. The use of incidental notes and photographic evidence is used to good effect in some lessons, in the Foundation Stage, for example. Good portfolios of work are kept to demonstrate pupils' progress in some key areas.

Leadership and management

The interim arrangements for leadership and management have been successful in giving the school a secure start. Much has been achieved on which to build and speed up pupils' progress. The new headteacher has quickly come to an accurate evaluation of the current quality of provision. He has built firm and supportive relationships and vision for the school's next stage of development. Middle and senior leaders do not all have clearly defined roles and the headteacher is in the process of adding detail to their work and his expectations of individual roles. The school has produced its intended plan for improvement but this does not include a statement about how quickly pupils' progress will be lifted to at least satisfactory levels.

Key to the school's future success has been the establishment of a cohesive team of staff that are working with determination to improve provision and raise standards. Governors are part of that team and acting with a similar resolve. They are working hard on this Fresh Start with all the additional work that it has entailed, to set up policies and procedures, to oversee a building project, and agree future developments. The school is fostering strong links with parents and nearby schools and businesses, and is ambitious to make its mark in the community.

External support

The local authority is providing effective, wide ranging support and has been central to the work of improving provision and outcomes both in the school and also in the wider community. It is harnessing the services of many agencies to support pupils and their parents even before the children start school. It is working with partners from both the public and private sectors in this endeavour. The process of closing and opening schools was managed well.

The local authority was instrumental in securing the services of two temporary headteachers. Staff value greatly the support of many local authority consultants and support staff who work alongside them to develop the curriculum, and advise on teaching approaches and support strategies. The local authority, in handling some administrative tasks, is doing much to ensure that the headteacher is enabled to focus on the central issue of raising achievement and standards. Funds are being allocated at above the usual levels so that relatively smaller classes can be staffed in the early stages of this new school's life.

Main Judgements

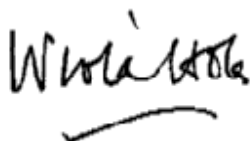
The school's overall progress is satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Determine the timeframe in which the school is aiming to bring pupils' progress over each Key Stage up to at least satisfactory levels. Make clear how well groups of pupils, as well as individual pupils, are making progress in each of the three main stages.
- Extend pupils' involvement in lessons, and teachers' use of pertinent questioning to check pupils' grasp of new material.
- Define more clearly the school's expectations of the work of subject and other key leaders in relation to improving the overall quality of provision and keeping pupils' progress under review.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Viola Hola". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Viola Hola
H M Inspector