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15 July 2008

Mr Jon Gray
The Headteacher
Willowcroft Community School
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Dear Mr Gray

Fresh Start: Monitoring Inspection of Willowcroft Community School

Introduction

Following my visit with Christopher Parker and Keith Williams to your school on 8 and 9 July 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 September 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 11 parts of lessons and an assembly 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 examined.

Context

Willowcroft Community School opened in new buildings, as a Fresh Start school in September 2007. Around two thirds of the teachers and teaching assistants currently in Willowcroft transferred from the predecessor school. Around one third of teachers and teaching assistants have been newly appointed to the school. The school is slightly larger than average. There are more pupils in the older years of the school than there are in the younger years. Most pupils are of White British heritage and the number of pupils whose first language is not English is well below the national

average. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals is similar to the national average. The proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above that found in most schools. The headteacher was appointed in January 2007 and managed the transition to the new school. A new non-teaching deputy head was appointed in September 2007 and two new senior teachers were appointed in January 2008. The governing body has one vacancy for a parent governor.

Achievement and standards

Children entered the Foundation Stage in September 2007 with standards well below those expected for their age. Provision in the Foundation Stage has improved during the past year and as a consequence the progress made by children in their learning is now good. However, standards will still be below those expected for their age by the time children enter Year 1.

The attainment of pupils in Years 1 to 6 is regularly checked by a combination of tests and teacher assessments. A good central system to record this information has been established and so the school is able to track the progress of pupils over time. This tracking shows that although there has been an improvement in the progress made by pupils there is some inconsistency between year groups. The school is only just beginning to enable pupils to catch up the ground that was lost during their earlier years of schooling.

The recently completed end of Year 2 assessments indicate that the percentage of pupils attaining the expected level 2 in reading and writing is well below the national figure although it is average in mathematics. The percentage of pupils attaining the higher levels is well below average in all three subjects. The school's internal assessments indicate that pupils in Year 6 have made satisfactory progress this year although their standards are below the national average.

Personal development and well-being

The considerable emphasis placed on improving the climate for learning has brought clear benefits to the pupils' personal development and well-being. The pupils say how much behaviour has improved. They make stark comparisons between the poor behaviour they witnessed in the predecessor school and the calm and respectful behaviour displayed by most of the pupils in the new school. Exclusions have fallen dramatically. The pupils say that they feel safe on the playground and enjoy the many activities provided by the play leaders at lunchtimes.

Pupils are motivated by curriculum developments, such as the theme weeks. These activities generate considerable enjoyment for pupils and have helped to improve attendance, although it remains below average. The pupils speak enthusiastically about 'healthwise' week and some are able to talk about the importance of a healthy diet and the benefits of cutting out chocolate in favour of fruit and yoghurt. However, others acknowledge that they are not yet as careful about what they eat.

Pupils are encouraged to take responsibility and the school council provides a good example of how pupils are taking greater responsibility and helping to improve the school, for example, through the introduction of playground buddies. They have also organised a sponsored walk to raise funds for their partner school in Uganda. The school makes good use of the local area. For example, they use the nearby Millennium Wood to support the pupils' learning. Visits to places of worship such as a synagogue and Hindu temple broaden the pupils' cultural development. The pupils are increasingly cooperative and many work together well although a few still find this a challenge.

Quality of provision

The school's own monitoring records of teaching and learning show that it is improving and all is now satisfactory and much is good. This monitoring visit confirmed the school's judgement of teaching and learning as accurate. This improved teaching is beginning to enable pupils to catch up the ground that was lost during their earlier years of schooling. However, the leadership team recognise that there is more that needs to be done to raise standards to the level they should be.

Teachers plan lessons well and share the learning objectives and success criteria with pupils so that they are clear of the purpose of the lesson. Typically relationships in lessons are good; pupils behave well and are willing to participate in activities. The positive behaviour of pupils is encouraged by the consistent application of the behaviour policy by all staff. This visit to the school was made during a week when there was a focus on outdoor education. Most lessons were based around engaging activities, some of them outside of the classroom. In most lessons tasks were pitched at the right level for all pupils and activities proceeded at a good pace. In some lessons time was usefully spent ensuring that pupils' knowledge and understanding of previously taught topics was secure. Classes are supported by teaching assistants and in most cases they provide pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with effective support. However, on a few occasions when pupils are listening to teachers the teaching assistants' time is not well used. Some lessons also lack sufficient challenge for the most able pupils. On a few occasions the pace of lessons can fall, when teachers talk for too long, and the rate of learning becomes satisfactory.

The school has made a good start in establishing a broad and interesting curriculum. This is having a positive impact on pupils' enjoyment of school. Literacy and numeracy are planned carefully using national guidelines and staff have received extra training in teaching phonics and leading guided reading sessions. There are early signs that a phonic based intervention programme is having a positive impact in raising standards in reading and writing. Staff work together in teams to ensure that their planning meets the needs of pupils of different ability. This works well for pupils who have difficulty learning, but the school recognises that provision for the most able is at an early stage of development. Links between subjects are developing so that, for example, pupils use their art skills to help their work in science and history. A particular success is the school's use of the outdoor environment to promote pupils' learning. Pupils have regular access to school-based

and other local environmental areas and all year groups' work with staff from the 'Forest School'. International links help foster pupils' understanding of their place in the wider world. There is a wide range of out-of-school activities, visits and visitors to school.

The school has made significant strides forward in the care and support it provides for pupils. Those pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in the nurture class are particularly well supported and are making good progress in their personal development. This class is also making a positive contribution to the establishment of a calm learning environment across the school. Staff from a wide range of agencies provide the most vulnerable pupils and their families with effective support. Arrangements for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are well managed. The plans that set out the targets and support for these pupils have improved and now have a much sharper focus on exactly what each pupil is expected to learn.

Improvements in the school's approach to marking and target setting are evident in some pupils' work but some inconsistencies remain. This means that not all pupils are clear about what they must do to improve their work. The school collects comprehensive data about each pupil's attainment although its analysis of progress is still hampered by the variable quality of assessments transferred from the predecessor school. Nevertheless, the available data is used well to identify those pupils in need of additional support and guidance.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has provided the school with clear and effective leadership. He is well supported by the recently formed senior leadership team. He has focussed all staff successfully on improving pupil behaviour through the consistent implementation of the school behaviour policy. The climate for learning in the school has improved during the year enabling teachers to use a greater variety of teaching and learning styles in their lessons. The senior leadership team monitor teaching and learning well and give good advice to teachers about how to improve their practice.

Subject co-ordinators are still developing their roles. There is some good practice notably in English where the co-ordinator has recently led the implementation of an effective phonics based intervention programme. However, some co-ordinators are at an early stage of development in terms of leadership and management skills.

The priorities for improvement are clearly identified in the raising achievement plan and it has provided the school with a good blue print for success. It has been systematically implemented and has led to improvement in some key areas of the school. The leadership team have good systems for self evaluation and are aware of the school's strengths and remaining areas of weakness. In the light of this information the plan has been sensibly refined for next year to focus clearly on the remaining areas in need of development. The leadership team recognise that the

success criteria in some sections of the plan are not sufficiently specific and this is to be rectified within the new plan.

The governing body contains a wide range of experience. They have provided the leadership team with effective support and they are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. This knowledge is being further improved through developing links with subject areas.

External support

The local authority has monitored the implementation and impact of the raising achievement plan well through school reviews and a regularly convened task group that contains both school and authority personnel. This has enabled the authority to effectively target support at areas in need of improvement. Good support has been provided by specialist teachers and consultants to improve teaching and learning in the school. Effective leadership and management and inclusion support has also been provided. The local authority recognises that more effective support could have been provided to the school during the transfer processes from the predecessor school to Willowcroft.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve standards by increasing the percentage of good and better lessons.
- Continue to develop the phonic based intervention programme to improve reading and writing standards.
- Ensure that lessons contain sufficient challenge for the most able pupils.
- Ensure that all marking and feedback to pupils gives them clear advice about what they need to do to improve their work.
- Support subject co-ordinators in their leadership and management roles.
- Improve attendance.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children Services for Oxfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Peter Sanderson
H M Inspector of Schools