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24 June 2008

Ms Sally-Anne Crowther
The Headteacher
Thameside Primary School
Cotman Close
Abingdon
OX14 5NL

Dear Ms Crowther

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THAMESIDE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Following my visit to your school on 9 and 10 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 became subject to special measures in January 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – 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 and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Principal Administrative Officer for Oxfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Mike Thompson
Additional Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF THAMESIDE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 9 and 10 June 2008

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the consultant headteacher working with the school, a member of staff with leadership responsibility, the chair of governors, a group of pupils, and a senior adviser from the local authority. The inspector observed teaching in all classes and looked through samples of pupils' work, teachers' planning, monitoring records and tracking data.

Context

The school continues to experience significant turbulence in staffing which will result in a complete change in teaching staff during the period July 2007 to September 2008. Two newly qualified teachers were appointed last September to teach the Year 1/2 and Year 6 classes. The Year 4/5 class teacher joined in January 2008, and the Year 3/4 class teacher left during the course of this term. She has been replaced on a temporary basis by a job-share comprising a supply teacher and a school improvement advisory teacher from the local authority. The Foundation Stage teacher, who is the longest-serving member of staff and the only teacher, apart from the headteacher, with management responsibility is to leave at the end of this term.

The school has been receiving intensive support from the local authority since September 2005, and in September 2007 was identified by the DCFS as a 'Hard to Shift' school because of the continuing low standards at the end of Key Stage 2.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' language skills are low because there are weaknesses in their knowledge of letter sounds, sentence construction and grammar. Pupils' lack of basic vocabulary has an adverse impact on learning in all lessons. For example, pupils are often unable to read simple instructions. In many lessons, teachers need to spend time explaining the meaning of the learning objectives before work can begin. Last term, the headteacher introduced a new approach to reading. This has been well received by pupils, staff and parents, and the school reports that pupils are beginning to make better progress. Writing skills remain weak. There are too many pupils working at levels below those expected for their age and far too few exceeding them. This is because standards of handwriting are weak, pupils lack confidence as writers, and do not have enough opportunities to practise their skills by writing at length.

Underpinning these weaknesses in reading and writing are the poor speech patterns displayed by many pupils. Pupils' mathematical skills are adversely affected by insecure knowledge of basic functions, such as multiplication tables. In addition, the weak standard of presentation means that calculations are poorly set out and difficult to follow. The school's tracking data indicate that some pupils are now making better progress. This is confirmed by lesson observations, which show that pupils generally make satisfactory gains in their learning. This is an improvement on the situation at

the time of the previous inspection. However, this rate of progress is insufficient to make inroads into the backlog of underachievement found in both key stages.

Teachers' marking of work is not yet effective enough in helping pupils to make progress. This is because corrections are generally not used as a tool for improvement and pupils do not act on the comments made by teachers. The school is trialling a new marking system with the intention of improving the effectiveness of the dialogue between teacher and pupils. This system, known as 'Tickle Pink and Green to Grow' entails teachers marking pupils' work using two colours. At present, teachers do not provide enough 'Green to Grow' developmental comments.

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

- Raise standards and improve progress in English and mathematics in Years 1 to 6 by identifying precisely what pupils need to achieve to advance to the next stage of learning – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

The school has implemented a range of initiatives designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The observations of lessons carried out by the consultant headteacher have effectively informed the individual teaching programmes devised for all staff. In addition, a 'buddy' system has been set up in partnership with a local high-performing school so that teachers can learn from good practice. Teaching is improving slowly, but more needs to be done to ensure consistency and raise teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve, particularly the more able. Teachers now routinely ensure that pupils know clearly at the start of each lesson what they are intended to learn. They do this by displaying and discussing the objectives for each lesson. In some lessons teaching is rather directive and consequently pupils do not develop the skills and confidence to work independently. Some progress has been made in ensuring that the teachers make clear to pupils precisely what they need to do in order to achieve success in the different tasks set. However, too few teachers ensure that these steps to success are a focus for pupils as they complete their tasks. Some good modelling of correct spoken language is found in the Foundation Stage, but this practice is not found elsewhere, and too often teachers accept grammatically incorrect responses from their pupils.

Teaching assistants provide useful support for class teachers, although they are sometimes passive observers during teachers' introductions to lessons. They sometimes make a significant difference to pupils' learning through the good quality help they provide. However, this practice is inconsistent and on too many occasions they do too much for the pupils. This does little to break down the lack of involvement in their learning that too many pupils show. The school refers to this as 'learned helplessness' and recognises it as a significant barrier to further progress. Overall, pupils' motivation for coming to school is not driven by an enjoyment of lessons. When asked by the inspector to list what they liked most about the school, no pupil mentioned either teaching or any aspect of the curriculum apart from physical education. Their principal reasons for being at school generally related to friendships and opportunities to play. Overall, pupils usually make satisfactory, and sometimes good, gains in their learning in lessons. The school acknowledges that there is still much to do to achieve its ambitious target of all teaching being satisfactory or better and 80% good or better. The realisation of this target is

essential, in order to make inroads into the low standards that are the legacy of underachievement in previous years.

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

- Use day-to-day assessment to set tasks that engage pupils and are well matched to their needs and capabilities – satisfactory.
- Provide pupils with the skills and opportunities to become independent learners – this was not a focus for this monitoring visit.

Leadership and management

Leadership at all levels is not yet effective enough. The headteacher is well supported by her consultant partner, and together they have introduced a raft of initiatives focused on improving standards and achievement. However, the impact is yet to be seen. A lot of effort has been given to improving the quality of teaching, and the consultant headteacher has taken the lead in monitoring and evaluating the skills of teachers. She has been successful in identifying all of the key improvements that need to be made. However, the format used for recording observations does not ensure that the focus is on the learning taking place rather than the technical skills in teaching. The changes in staffing over the past year have meant that the school has no middle management structure and the single remaining teacher with management responsibility is due to leave. The headteacher views this situation positively and sees it as an opportunity to implement a new structure and provide training to develop the leadership skills of the staff from the start of the new academic year. A recent budgetary review by the local authority has provided the financial stability necessary to enable posts of responsibility to be advertised, and one of the new appointments has already been made.

Self-evaluation is mostly undertaken by the headteacher and her consultant partner; however, governors are beginning to become more involved as they develop their roles. A range of initiatives to improve governance are planned, such as training in the evaluation of performance data, to help governors become more confident and independent in monitoring the effectiveness of the school. However, the governing body is also affected by change. The chair of governors has resigned her post, but is prepared to take on the role of Parent Champion during the coming academic year. This is an important task, since the views of parents are not sought widely enough.

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

- Build the capacity of leaders to evaluate accurately the work of the school and to pursue improvement rigorously – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority is providing satisfactory support for the school. This is largely achieved through the work of the consultant headteacher, the link with a local school, and the support from the school improvement partner and curriculum consultants. The task group established following the special measures judgement is ensuring that progress is regularly monitored through the school improvement plan. This supportive framework is crucial, given the continued changes in staffing and the consequent training needs. The local authority's statement of action had some weaknesses. They related to the lack of detail to demonstrate in what ways

leadership will be better placed to overcome the significant barriers to learning, and the lack of detail about the ways in which teaching will be improved. These have now been addressed.

Priorities for further improvement

- As an integral element of planning already in place to improve the quality of teaching and learning, raise standards, and provide pupils with the skills to become independent learners: promote a culture for learning within the school so that pupils show a real enjoyment and enthusiasm for their studies.