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15 July 2008

Mrs Sue Ball and Mr Felix Rayner
The Acting Headteacher and the Executive Headteacher
The Winchcombe School
Maple Crescent
Shaw
Newbury
RG14 1LN

Dear Mrs Ball and Mr Rayner

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF THE WINCHCOMBE SCHOOL

Following my visit with Michael Lafford and Graham Stephens, Additional Inspectors, 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 became subject to special measures in February 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 Chief Improvement Advisor for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Maria Dawes
H M Inspector

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING OF THE WINCHCOMBE SCHOOL

Report from the first monitoring inspection: 8 and 9 July 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting head teacher, the executive headteacher, senior and other staff, the chair person of the interim executive board and the school improvement partner. Behaviour was also observed during playtimes, lunchtimes and in assembly. An inspector also met with representatives from the school council.

Context

Since the school was placed in special measures in February 2008 the substantive head is on long-term leave and her position is being covered by the seconded deputy head. An interim executive headteacher, a senior local authority advisor, was appointed to give strategic management to the school between March and the end of May. The current executive head is seconded from another Local Authority school and took up the post on 1 June 2008. Both the acting and executive headteacher are contracted for the next academic year. In addition there is an acting deputy and assistant headteacher. Two teachers left shortly after the inspection and their posts are covered by temporary teachers. A further four teachers are leaving at the end of the term. All posts have been filled for September. An interim executive board (IEB) has taken the place of the governing body.

Achievement and standards

This year's unvalidated results for the end of Year 2 show that standards have improved since 2007. In particular standards in reading and mathematics are significantly higher at all levels and, although still below, closer to the national average. Standards in writing were weaker and the percentage of pupils attaining a secure Level 2 or above declined from 2007. Assessment data predicts that results at the end of Key Stage 2 will have increased this year in mathematics and English but not in science. However this still represents underachievement for this year group and standards are lower than those found nationally.

The strengths found at the last inspection in the Foundation Stage remain. Teachers and other adults have a good understanding of how young children learn and know their pupils well. Consequently teaching is good leading to pupils making good progress from low starting points.

The acting headteacher has developed clear systems for tracking pupils' academic progress. Information has been collated from previous end of year assessments in reading, writing and mathematics and teachers make termly assessments of pupils' current levels giving an overview of each their progress over the past year. This means the school can now identify which pupils need to make accelerated progress and in which subjects and the headteachers with class teachers are beginning to focus planning, teaching and intervention more closely to pupils' needs.

The school is starting to address the legacy of underachievement both through improved whole-class teaching, supported by the intensifying support programme (ISP), and through targeted intervention and catch-up programmes. In the majority of classes the percentage of children reaching or exceeding the expected levels for their age has increased. However there is still significant underachievement in some classes where there has been considerable disruption of staffing and the lack of continuity has had a negative impact on many pupils. Across the school, the pace of learning, while improving, is not yet consistently rapid enough to make up for the previous gaps in pupils' knowledge.

A focus on teaching reading through phonics has led to improved standards in most year groups. The school has plans to strengthen this by introducing a reading catch-up programme for all classes in September. In addition, standards in speaking and listening are improving and consequently more pupils show an interest and confidence in answering questions and giving opinions. They practise using their 'talk partners' before they speak in front of the whole class. The school is aware that although improving in some classes standards in writing lag behind those in reading and have in place a focused plan for improvement. Pupils are now more enthusiastic about mathematics and in the lessons and work seen there was a good emphasis on encouraging children to give explanations of their reasoning as well as their methods. A group of more able year 6 pupils have recently beaten 14 other primary schools to win a local mathematics problem solving competition. Standards in science across the school remain weak, in part due to the increased focus on literacy and numeracy and in part due to a weak curriculum. The subject co-ordinator has plans in hand to strengthen this.

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

- Raise achievement and standards in English and mathematics and science – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Since the last inspection the school has identified behaviour as an area needing improvement and has implemented a new behaviour policy across the school. This is beginning to have a positive impact because pupils are more aware of what is required of them. However, unacceptable behaviour, though increasingly rare, is not always dealt with in a consistent manner by all staff. Pupils are enthusiastic about many aspects of the school life. The school council is increasing proactive. They have recently been involved in fund raising for a number of events, in proposals to improve the school environment and promoting improved behaviour across the school.

Attendance levels have fallen since 2007 and are below the national average. This is largely because too many parents are taking extended holidays during term time. The school is taking steps to discourage this practice.

Quality of provision

Teaching has improved since the last inspection and is now satisfactory overall. Most teaching observed during this visit was either satisfactory or good with just one

inadequate lesson. However this is still not good enough and further improvement is needed to accelerate progress and make up for past underachievement.

Teachers have responded very positively to support, including that through the ISP programme, and are determined and committed to improve achievement and raise standards. They now celebrate good examples of pupils' work in displays around the school with many indicating the positive impact information and communication technology (ICT) is beginning to have on learning. Pupils are keen to learn and relationships in lessons are good. In successful lessons the pace of learning is brisk, teachers question well, work is well matched to need and pupils make good progress. However, the quality of teaching and its impact on learning is still inconsistent.

Learning intentions are consistently shared with pupils at the beginning of lessons but not always using language appropriate to the age and ability of the pupils and the meaning is not made clear to some. In addition, planning indicates that teachers are not always linking learning intentions clearly to learning outcomes and opportunities to assess the impact of teaching and to consolidate learning are lost. Systems to assess pupils' work and monitor their progress are now secure but teachers still do not always use the information gained to match work to the identified needs of the pupils. Consequently, work is sometimes either too challenging or too easy. Some marking is exemplary and clearly indicates what the pupil has to do to improve however it is not consistent between classes. Similarly some teachers accept poorly presented work and some don't, confusing pupils as to what is and what is not, acceptable.

Teaching assistants have established good working relationships with pupils. Generally they support them well, especially in group sessions and when supporting pupils with specific learning difficulties. However, the quality of guidance from class teachers is variable. As a result, class teaching assistants are sometimes too passive during introductory carpet sessions. On other occasions they do not present work in a way that is easily understood or and matched to the ability of the group supported.

The curriculum continues to provide a satisfactory basis for teachers' planning. All staff are keen to integrate subjects whenever possible to make subjects even more interesting and relevant to pupils' needs and aspirations. Planning for September reflects this ambition. Staff are also keen to create more opportunities for pupils to apply the skills they are taught.

Pupils are now being given better advice on how to improve their work and have challenging targets in literacy and numeracy through the ISP. This improvement is already showing through in the progress pupils make. Support and guidance for pupils with specific learning needs is very strong. The school has augmented this provision by adding a range of support for pupils who have fallen behind as well as those with identified special needs. The focus of this help has been on reading and numeracy. The Speech and Language Unit and the Language and Literacy Unit share a site with the school and cover a wide geographical area. Flexible arrangements allow pupils to be given valuable help and school staff benefit strongly from the considerable professional expertise of both facilities.

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

- Improve the use of assessment information to plan appropriate and challenging work for all pupils – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher along with the interim and current executive headteachers have been very successful in raising staff morale and establishing a shared commitment to school improvement. Although relatively inexperienced the acting deputy and assistant headteacher are highly enthusiastic and keen to develop their expertise. The senior leadership team as a whole is now beginning to work well to provide clear and supportive leadership. There is a positive ethos amongst staff who are clearly focused on improving teaching and the quality of learning.

The acting and executive headteachers have a very good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school and in particular have introduced rigorous and frequent systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. The executive head has a clear remit, and dedicated time, for improving learning and this is beginning to pay dividends. However it will be crucial that advice and support are consistently embedded in teachers' practice. There are now systems for tracking pupils' progress. However, not yet all teachers are using the data to help them refine their work and help pupils progress faster. Subject co-ordinators are enthusiastic and now feel empowered to focus on accelerating progress and raising standards in their subjects. They are more confident in their understanding of what they need to do in order to track and monitor progress but it is early days and to date they have had little opportunity to exercise their new roles. They will be joined by a new literacy and numeracy co-ordinator in September.

Since the last inspection the school improvement plan has been rewritten and is clearly linked to the ISP Raising Attainment Plan (RAP). It is detailed with a clear picture of the steps that need to be taken to tackle underachievement. This includes a new structure for staffing, middle leadership responsibilities and for the school day from September. However, although linked to the RAP priority targets, most of the success criteria lack short term quantitative outcomes or interim mile-stones by which to judge the success of outcomes. The IEB has made a good start and holds staff firmly to account. Each board member has a specific remit and offers support and challenge in those areas.

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

- Improve leadership and management at all levels, especially in relation to monitoring and improving the quality of teaching and learning – satisfactory

External support

The local authority's statement of action is clear and the related support is good and confirms its commitment to the school's improvement in particular through the appointment of a full-time executive headteacher in addition to an acting headteacher. The school improvement partner is highly supportive and has a good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for improvement. The local

authority has already put in place a broad range of effective support for the school, including extensive consultancy advice for both the acting and executive head teachers. Classroom teachers benefit from strong external advice on how to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In addition there is a very high level of expertise on the IEB which enables it to offer support and advice in addition to holding the senior leadership team to account.

The date set for removal from Special Measures of 1 March 2009 at the latest is ambitious but there is now a commitment from all involved with the school, including the pupils, to make this rapid improvement. However the Local Authority must be sure that the school can sustain any improvements once the high level of support is reduced.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve attendance and in particular reduce unauthorised absence.