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Mr Stephen Hanscombe
Headteacher
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Crosby Road
Northallerton
North Yorkshire
DL6 1AE

Dear Mr Hanscombe

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Mill Hill Community Primary School

Following my visit with Mr Roger Gill, Additional Inspector, to your school on 2 and 3 December 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in May 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Corporate Director for Children and Young People's Services for North Yorkshire.

Yours sincerely

Mark Wilson
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Mill Hill Community Primary School

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 2 and 3 December 2008

Evidence

The inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with key staff including the headteacher and deputy headteacher, groups of pupils, several parents, the vice-chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA). A discussion was also held with the school improvement partner.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection a new vice-chair of governors has been appointed. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) leader, with responsibility for information and communication technology (ICT), is leaving the school at the end of the autumn term 2008. The school has appointed a teacher to take over these responsibilities from the start of January 2009. As a result of a previous deficit budget, there has been a reduction in the number of teaching staff and some teaching responsibilities have changed. The school is now in an improved but still constrained budgetary position.

Achievement and standards

The school's evidence on the standards reached by pupils by the end of Year 2 in 2008 shows a considerable improvement in comparison to the 2007 standards. In contrast, while the standards at the end of Year 6 in 2008 in mathematics and English improved, they did not improve as much overall as the school had anticipated, particularly in writing and in science. These provisional results reflected the gaps in pupils' previous learning. The school has analysed these results and used the findings to improve teaching throughout the school. More ambitious targets, based on thorough assessment, have now been set for each year group and are designed to help pupils reach levels appropriate for their age by July 2009. Since the last monitoring inspection, the school has made broadly satisfactory progress in raising achievement and standards and in starting to eradicate gaps in pupils' learning. This is a result of more sharply focused teaching in Years 2 and 6, more consistent teaching in other year groups and reorganised support for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Progress in science is improving because lessons are now organised to maximise pupils' involvement in hypothesis testing. Increasingly, pupils find things out for themselves rather than being told by the teacher. Similarly, pupils are made to feel more responsible for their own progress when producing pieces of writing. More able pupils are enjoying the extra challenges and responsibilities they are given, but occasionally demands on them are still not ambitious enough, although in general these pupils are learning at a pace commensurate with their abilities. Some pupils, for example, in Year 6, who had a lot of ground to make up in their writing, have

progressed at over double the nationally expected rate in a few months. Overall, pupils' progress is improving at a steady rate but it varies between classes across the school.

Children's achievements in the EYFS have developed as a result of improvements to the way in which the areas for learning are laid out and the way the new team of staff works together. Assessment at the end of 2008 in the EYFS showed that children had not made enough progress, particularly in personal development and in language and literacy work. However, the introduction of the nationally recommended methods to teach letters and their sounds and an emphasis on children doing more for themselves has now quickened the pace of learning. While there is still more to do in raising standards and achievement by the end of Reception, children's progress in the EYFS is moving in the right direction.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

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

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development was not a key area for improvement in the inspection report of May 2007. Consequently, this was not a focus of this visit. Pupils do say how much more they enjoy school now because learning is more fun, as teachers require them to be more involved in lessons. Pupils are clear that behaviour has improved. However, they are irritated by a small minority of pupils whose behaviour is not as good as it should be, especially outside lessons. While pupils feel their school is helping them to be healthy, they are saddened by their poor toilet facilities. To help improve pupils' personal development, opportunities are being taken by teachers to explore pupils' thoughts and feelings. Some pupils find it difficult to engage in these activities because of their lack of experience and comfort in this type of lesson.

Quality of provision

Since the previous monitoring visit the quality of teaching overall has continued to improve.

In the EYFS, teacher-led and child-initiated learning activities increasingly help the children to make greater progress in communication and personal development. However, how well the adults intervene with the children continues to vary. Occasionally, this is more focused upon controlling and organising the children rather than on developing their thinking and learning skills. Opportunities are still missed to make best use of the outdoor space.

In the most successful lessons in Key Stages 1 and 2, inspirational teaching and very engaging topics are increasing pupils' motivation to learn. This demonstrates the strides that the school has made in improving its curriculum. In some less strong lessons, the motivation of the pupils continues to vary depending upon the task they

are presented with. Teachers often now provide the pupils with all the features of a good lesson. For example, they make it clear what is to be learned and how and involve pupils as talking partners. Despite this, in some instances pupils' learning is not accelerating. This is because their learning skills remain insufficiently developed to respond to the new approaches to learning provided by the teachers. This legacy of weak learning skills is a continuing barrier to some pupils' progress in lessons. Some teachers are starting to hand responsibility to pupils as 'table captains' to help their group learn more quickly, but it is too soon for the full effects of this to be felt.

Pupils are now more actively involved in their learning. This was clearly demonstrated in a science lesson when one Year 3 / 4 class enjoyed testing the durability of the ankle spinners they had made. In the stronger lessons, work is more closely matched to all pupils' needs. In other lessons, this remains variable with greater challenge for the more able pupils not yet fully developed. The school is embarking upon a partnership with two other schools to help address this. While the teachers' use of questions to help pupils learn has improved, the quality still varies across classes, resulting in some pupils not thinking sufficiently for themselves. Teachers are now making better use of the interactive white board to engage pupils more in their learning, although pupils' use of ICT as a learning aid is still undeveloped.

The staffing restructure has meant teachers are now working to their strengths across the school and are planning together more effectively with an increased emphasis on what pupils will learn. Teachers' expectations have been raised through the influence of strong teachers now leading by example in each key stage. Pupils appreciate the efforts the teachers have made to link topics together to make learning more interesting. They speak well of the much wider range of activities in their lessons. Pupils were particularly excited by the more innovative approaches used to help them learn, for example, through role play in their history lessons on the Tudors which involved a falconry demonstration. Similarly, pupils were very proud to show their parents the loaves they had baked, relating, for example, their new learning about the properties of yeast.

The marking of pupils' work continues to improve with most pupils now knowing how well they are doing and what level they are aiming for, although they remain less clear about how to improve their work. In one Year 6 class, the teacher is exploring the use of guidance sessions between the teacher and individual pupils to address this. The school is now focused upon improving the quality and impact of the assessment of pupils' work by teachers. Leaders have recognised that teachers have been too reliant upon testing, rather than using assessed pieces of pupils' work, to help them judge the next steps in pupils' learning. Teachers are working together to standardise their approach in assessing pupils' work.

Teaching assistants are now linked to classes rather than to groups of pupils and so teachers can involve them more appropriately in their lessons. However, the quality of the support provided for pupils still varies. Some training has been provided for the assistants, for example, on approaches to supporting pupils with their calculations, but it is too early for this to have improved learning in mathematics.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve teaching, particularly by raising the level of challenge especially for the more able pupils – good

Leadership and management

The headteacher and deputy headteacher continue to ensure the school has a stable leadership as well as focusing very closely upon improving the school. This is clearly seen through the rigorous improvement planning they have put in place and the impact it has had on, for example, improving teaching. The leadership has secured the support of parents, who appreciate the openness with which they can approach the school. This is clearly seen by their attendance at class assemblies and in the very recent Key Stage 1 production of 'The Very Hopeless Camel'. This is the first time in three years the school has produced a nativity play, again testament to the determination of the leadership to bring the school and community together. The school has also supported parents by raising their awareness of the different approaches that they may use to help their children with their numeracy work.

Leaders have continued to monitor effectively, setting clear expectations for the teachers, for example, in the use of questions to get pupils to think for themselves. Swift action has been taken to tackle the weaknesses that caused the low standards in the EYFS in 2008. Effective steps have also been taken to ensure that a smooth transition is made when leadership of EYFS and ICT changes.

The headteacher has been increasingly effective in making staff accountable for pupils' progress. Performance management of teachers has now started and lesson observation and work scrutiny now clearly focus upon those pupils who are not on target to achieve their potential.

Subject leaders are feeling much more confident and autonomous in their leadership and are taking more of a lead, for example, in the moderation of writing and the development of cross-curricular activities. They have developed more robust systems and approaches to improve teaching and learning. This includes the analysis of pupils' test results to identify and remedy weaknesses in their understanding. Subject leaders in English, mathematics and science have undertaken observations of other teachers and have used their findings to improve the quality of lessons. In ICT, the subject leader has initiated an audit of how well ICT is used across the school, but improvement to the resources remains constrained by the budget.

The governors' committee structure is improved and is securing a much closer focus upon pupils' standards and achievement. Governors are also tracking more closely and providing greater challenge to the school on its improvement against the development plan. The chair and newly appointed vice-chair are setting a clear direction and the governing body has benefited from strong appointments to key positions. Subject leaders also value the support and challenge their subject link governors are now bringing.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Ensure long-term stability in leadership and management in order to provide a secure foundation for improvement – good

External support

The school continues to receive strong support from the LA through the LA adviser and school improvement partner. The headteacher has a clear understanding of when support is appropriate and what type of help is needed. Similarly, subject leaders are much more informed as to what support best meets their needs.

Priorities for further improvement

The priorities for further improvement continue to be those identified at the school's inspection in May 2007.