

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

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

Direct T 01695 566 947
Direct F 01695 729 320
sdaly@cfbt.com



12 December 2008

Mrs Kirsty Haw
Executive Headteacher
Merton Bank Primary School
Roper Street
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 1EJ

Dear Mrs Haw

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Merton Bank Primary School

Following my visit with Michelle Ravey, Additional Inspector, to your school on 10 and 11 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 June 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

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 Director of Children and Young People's Services for St Helens.

Yours sincerely

Margot D'Arcy
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Merton Bank Primary School

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 10 and 11 December 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed lessons in each class. Discussions were held with the executive headteacher, other key staff and pupils. Discussions also took place with representatives of the governing body and the local authority school improvement partner (SIP). School documentation and pupils' work was analysed and pupils' conduct was observed.

Context

Since the previous visit, one teacher has resigned and a teacher who was on long-term leave of absence will leave the school at the end of this term. An informal 'soft' federation with the executive headteacher's own school has been agreed with a timescale of three to five years.

Achievement and standards

The most recent statutory assessments and tests taken by pupils in Years 2 and 6 reflect a worse picture than in 2007, particularly in relation to the higher levels attained at Key Stage 2 and in reading and writing at Key Stage 1. However, the fall in results was not unexpected and reflects the legacy of underachievement of these pupils, resulting from historical weaknesses in the provision. These weaknesses have also impacted on the achievement of other pupils and underpin the low standards and underachievement that are still evident for many pupils currently in school and which the school is now addressing.

Improved assessment systems are facilitating clearer identification of the gaps in pupils' learning, enabling the school to tackle these systematically to raise standards and improve achievement. The impact of this work is just beginning to be seen in the results of school assessments conducted in October this year, although this still shows some significant variation in rates of progress between year groups. Relatively few pupils are making better than the expected, satisfactory, rate of progress inherent in the school's targets. Moreover, the data suggest that a fairly large proportion of pupils continue to underachieve. However, the assessments were the first in the cycle of termly assessments planned, so it is too early for this data to provide an accurate view of progress or reflect the improved picture of provision seen during this monitoring inspection. Pupils' current work provides a better indicator of the positive impact of the many improvements to provision and shows that across the school the majority of pupils are making better progress in English, mathematics and science. There is clear evidence that pupils are producing a greater quantity of better quality work in all three subjects. Expectations of pupils' standards and achievement are clearly higher than previously. The school's targets are based on what is generally recognised as 'expected' levels of progress over time. However, given the significant legacy of underachievement, an 'expected' or 'satisfactory' rate of progress is unlikely to be sufficient to address the

underachievement that currently exists, and enable pupils to aspire to the standards expected for their age.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Raise standards and increase pupils' rate of progress, particularly in English – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils are responding well to the consistently applied behaviour policy and their behaviour continues to improve. Pupils understand fully the school's behaviour policy and rewards and sanctions, which are now reinforced well in displays around the school. Most behave better in lessons, assemblies, the dining hall and playground, and work hard to achieve 'golden time' at the end of the week. There is an increasing sense of 'belonging' and pride among pupils about their school. Aspirations are growing and pupils are very aware of the need to live up to their new school motto 'Believe, Achieve and Shine'. They relish the new roles of responsibility they have been given, such as peer and activity leaders. Pupils report that behaviour has improved, with one candidly explaining, 'I used to be naughty, but I've grown up now and can control my temper.' Some say that bullying and name-calling still exist, but understand that this can be dealt with, for example by putting a note in the 'bully box', which they can do anonymously, or by talking things through with an adult. The additional needs leader and head of safeguarding and extended schools have implemented very effective interventions to support vulnerable pupils since the last monitoring visit. The strong links formed with BEST (Behaviour, Emotional Support Team), the Youth Inclusion Programme and the police service, alongside liaison with, and support for, pupils' families, has done much to improve behaviour.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve behaviour at Key Stage 2 – good.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is improving and becoming more consistent. The proportion of good teaching is increasing and, in contrast to previous visits, no inadequate teaching was seen; outstanding teaching remains a feature in Year 6. Teachers' supportive but firm relationships with pupils and very effective management of their behaviour ensure that an increasing proportion of lessons are enjoyable and not disrupted by the challenging behaviour still presented by a minority. These lessons move on at a good pace and teachers employ a wide range of methods to capture pupils' interest and keep them engaged. These include talking partners, very effective use of interactive whiteboards and achieving a good balance between times for pupils to work practically and in groups and times for them to watch and listen. Overall, teachers are making more effective use of assessment to match work to pupils' needs. In some lessons, however, the average and more able pupils complete the same work when there remains scope to challenge the more able pupils further and accelerate their learning.

While there has been some improvement in how well teaching assistants support pupils, the overall quality of this provision remains inconsistent. Marking is notably improved and consistent across the school. Targets in literacy and numeracy are clear in pupils' books, with feedback to pupils through marking drawing well on these. Consequently, pupils know their targets and are becoming very aware of their strengths and how they might improve. The involvement of pupils in their learning is also becoming more evident in lessons, with some effective practice that includes pupils in assessing their work and evaluating how well they have achieved the lesson's learning objectives. Across the school, classroom displays provide better support for literacy. Similarly improved support for numeracy is evident in some classrooms, but not all. Some particularly good opportunities are being provided in science for pupils to devise and conduct investigations.

There has been notable improvement to the provision for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The learning environment and resources have been significantly enhanced and children now have opportunities to initiate learning and follow their own ideas. Overall, the quality of adult intervention in child-initiated work and learning through play is more appropriate than previously, with more effective modelling of language and promotion of children's talk. The increased opportunities provided for children to develop independence and control over aspects of their learning are being reflected in their greater engagement and enjoyment of learning.

Assessment systems are becoming more firmly established, providing teachers and the school with a clearer and more secure picture of pupils' standards and rate of progress. Assessment information is also becoming more reliable through such processes as external marking of non-statutory assessments, school and local authority moderation of teacher assessments and monitoring procedures. There are planned refinements to the current system of recording and tracking pupils' standards and progress to enable greater interrogation of the data to support further the setting of precise and challenging targets. At classroom level, target setting is generally drawing effectively on assessment information to improve the match of work to pupils' needs. Assessment information is also being used to support the provision of reports of pupils' progress and targets for individual pupils, thereby raising teachers', pupils' and parents' awareness of the exact areas in which pupils need to improve. Some particularly notable improvement has occurred to the assessment processes being used in the EYFS, giving staff a useful insight to children's day-to-day learning and progress over time. Information from EYFS observational assessments is clearly feeding into the different levels of planning for children's work and influencing the ways in which staff work with groups and individuals.

At whole-school level, assessment information is now being used effectively to set future targets, but these are not yet challenging enough.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning – good.
- Make better use of assessment to set more challenging targets for pupils that are closely matched to their needs – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

Systems for monitoring the work of the school are much more firmly embedded and rigorous than previously. The executive headteacher plays a central role in all monitoring activities and has maintained the involvement of senior and middle managers in this work. As such, the structure of the school's leadership and management continues to be strengthened in the drive to secure the school's capacity to improve.

The executive headteacher's high expectations have set the standard for the regular and rigorous monitoring that now occurs. The system is robust in identifying strengths and clear areas for improvement, for example in planning, teaching and learning. Even in good lessons, points about how teaching and learning could be better are made. The information gained from the intense, but necessary, programme of monitoring and performance management has undoubtedly underpinned improvements to the provision, particularly to teaching. The executive headteacher has a clear view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and, to varying degrees, this type of clarity is also becoming established at other levels of leadership. Governors too are now more involved in the school's work and are steadily developing the skills needed to challenge the school about its work and progress. Monitoring feeds much better into the school's development planning. Planning for improvement on many fronts is a tangible element, with the areas for improvement arising from the June 2007 inspection appropriately maintaining a high profile. This is steering the school forward in a much more focused way than previously. However, some of the indicators by which the school will measure the extent of its improvement, as noted in individual subject action plans, are still not always expressed clearly or precisely enough.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Establish robust systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the school to better inform planning for improvement – good.

External support

The school continues to benefit from the good support provided by the local authority and school improvement partner, and this support is having a positive impact on school improvement.

Priorities for further improvement

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