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Mrs Julie Bowman
Executive Headteacher
Blyth Horton Grange First School
Kitty Brewster
Blyth
Northumberland
NE24 4RE

Dear Mrs Bowman

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Blyth Horton Grange First School

Following my visit with Alastair Younger, Additional Inspector, to your school on 16 and 17 September 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

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

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate progress

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory progress

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 the interim executive board (IEB) and the Director of Child Services for Northumberland LA.

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Blyth Horton Grange First School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 16 and 17 September 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including 11 part lessons and one assembly. Documents were scrutinised and meetings held with the executive headteacher, the senior leadership team, representatives from the interim executive board (IEB), the school improvement partner (SIP), staff and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

Since the last visit there have been a number of staffing changes. Two new substantive assistant headteachers have been appointed. These two new appointments have extended the size of the senior team which now consists of the associate executive headteacher, a substantive deputy headteacher, three substantive assistant headteachers and an associate assistant headteacher seconded to the school. The roles and responsibilities of the senior team have been restructured. Two new teachers have joined the school on one year temporary contracts to cover vacancies created by the long-term absence of two teachers. Nearly half of the teachers are teaching in new year groups or are new to the school.

Achievement and standards

On entry to Nursery most children can do as much as others of their age. The results of assessments carried out at the end of the Reception Year in 2008 indicate that children make good and sometimes very good progress during the Foundation Stage. This is because teaching in the Nursery and Reception classes is at least satisfactory and often good and because data from day-to-day assessments are used to plan work which accurately meets the needs of all children. In lessons observed during the visit children made at least satisfactory progress in all the areas of learning and problem solving and number skills were particularly well developed during small group activities.

The results of tests and assessments carried out at the end of the summer term in Years 1 to 4 are encouraging. Although standards are still well below average the decline has been halted and there is evidence to suggest that some pupils are now making better progress. At the end of Year 2 more pupils attained Level 2 in reading, writing and mathematics than did so in previous years and the school met or exceeded floor targets. Similar improvements appear to have been made in other year groups and the outcomes of reading tests show that many pupils improved their reading skills. However, given their starting point too few pupils reach the

highest levels in all core subjects. Pupils achieve less well in writing than in other subjects.

New assessment procedures have been established and a number of new structures help teachers record pupil progress. However, some assessments are too generous because teachers lack the subject specific expertise needed to correctly identify achievement by National Curriculum level. Assessment information is used to track the progress made by individual pupils and classes. However, in 2008 a high proportion of pupils in all year groups failed to meet their targets. This is because target setting was imprecise as the school did not have records of previous achievement. The school now has a baseline from which to measure progress and can identify any underachievement promptly. Although tracking and assessment data is shared with class teachers, it is not used to plan work which meets the needs of all the pupils in a class and not all teachers make use of day-to-day assessment to ensure that all pupils progress as well as they should. This is a significant barrier to raising standards and improving the achievement of pupils. Pupils with learning difficulties and /or disabilities and more able pupils are not yet progressing well enough because the work they are given in lessons does not always meet their needs.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards in English and mathematics – satisfactory
- Make better provision to support pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities – inadequate

Personal development and well-being

Attendance is improving. The school has taken effective action to bring about improvement including refusing to authorise holidays in term time. Although this leads to a high proportion of unauthorised absence the school believes that some parents are beginning to consider the appropriateness of taking holidays in school time. This action coupled with a number of rewards and incentives resulted in a gain of just over one percentage point in attendance by the end of the summer term. Behaviour is now consistently good. Pupils are courteous to one another and to visitors and where there is some low-level disruption this is managed well by teachers. New teachers have established effective relationships with their classes. The results of questionnaires carried out by the school indicate that pupils feel safe and enjoy coming to school. Enjoyment in lessons is more variable, in some lessons it is limited by pupils inability to complete the work they are given. The proportion of pupils excluded from school has declined significantly.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Establish a uniform system to improve the behaviour of pupils – good

Quality of provision

Most teaching seen during the visit was satisfactory. A very small proportion of teaching was good and an equally small proportion was inadequate. Although there was less inadequate teaching than at the time of the last visit the senior leadership team and inspectors agree that the proportion of satisfactory teaching has not improved significantly during the time the school has been in special measures. School observations of teaching and the outcomes of paired observations with LA inspectors record a greater proportion of good teaching during the summer term; this better teaching was not evident during the visit.

The school has implemented a handwriting scheme and this is having a beneficial effect. Presentation is neater, work is better organised and most children now take pride in their work. Improving pupils' writing skills is a school priority and a commercial scheme has been purchased. The introduction of sharp, well focused and achievable learning targets in English and mathematics is a positive step forward although target books are unnecessarily complex. Most teachers comply with the marking policy although the quality of the guidance provided can be variable and marking is not always linked to pupils' targets. The school has rewritten the most important policy documents and staff now have clear guidance about what is expected. Teachers have been given coaching and support to help them improve lesson planning and some aspects of teaching. As a result, all teachers share the objectives of the lesson and success criteria with pupils. The school has a common format for lesson planning and most plans identify different tasks for different groups of pupils. However, evidence from the book scrutiny and from lessons observed during the visit confirms that in many lessons all pupils are given the same work and that even when attempts are made to provide different tasks for different ability groups this is rarely effective because some teachers do not understand how to simplify tasks or target them appropriately. Some new procedures are useful but were not well planned so they involve teachers in a great deal of extra work.

In the lesson where learning was good the teacher planned tasks carefully and made good use of the interactive whiteboard and different teaching styles. The lesson progressed at a suitable pace which allowed misconceptions to be corrected and new information to be absorbed and the teacher ensured that all pupils were skilfully supported by an adult. Pupils had much to interest them and because of the effective use made of questioning they could see that they were learning. In other lessons teaching and questioning were not sufficiently skilled to involve all pupils in the lesson and ensure that they made progress.

The curriculum is unsatisfactory. In some classes too little time is allocated to some subjects and the proportion of time allocated to subjects varies between classes. An additional two hours a week has been allocated to reading. However, this time is not used effectively. Most pupils listen to a story read by an adult while others are withdrawn to read to a teacher. Although a small minority of pupils benefit from this arrangement it limits the time available to cover the wider curriculum. The school is

not well resourced. Although some resources have been replaced there is still much to do. Some staff rely heavily on photocopied materials which are not well enough matched to pupils' interests or needs.

The senior team has considered the requirements of the early years and foundation stage (EYFS) and has implemented most of the guidance particularly that relating to the teaching of reading, spelling and mathematics. The EYFS is not well resourced. Provision for outdoor learning is inadequate. Resources are sparse and children in the Reception classes do not have the type of protective clothing which would help them use outdoor areas in all weathers without damaging their own clothes. The extent to which children can extend their independent and social skills is limited to some extent by the design of the building. For example there is no direct exit from the Reception classes to the outdoor area so children can only be taken outside in groups closely supervised by EYFS staff.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and the curriculum, in particular to encourage more involvement of pupils in their learning – inadequate

Leadership and management

The senior leadership team has been restructured and new roles and responsibilities have been established. The appointment of two additional assistant headteachers is designed to strengthen leadership in the short-term and to ensure that the school has sufficient senior leaders to support its transition into a primary school. However, the two new appointments are inexperienced and will require support and induction; this places an additional burden on the headteacher. There appears to be little difference in the roles and responsibilities of the deputy headteacher and the assistant headteachers and although the associate assistant headteacher is currently supporting other leaders in their new roles it is not clear what her role will be in the coming months. The senior team is large, given the size of the school, and each team member is responsible for an aspect of school improvement. Interventions will need to be managed carefully to ensure that staff are not overburdened with new initiatives.

The leadership of the EYFS is good. The Foundation Stage Leader has audited existing provision and has a clear idea of strengths and weaknesses. She understands the importance of day-to-day assessment and of small group teaching which meets the needs of individuals. She has a clear view of the most important improvement priorities and how these might be accomplished.

The headteacher has improved communication with parents and actively seeks their views. Most parents who responded to a recent school questionnaire felt their children were making better progress. The small number of parents who expressed

concerns were contacted and attempts were made to resolve any outstanding issues.

Plans made to improve the school are detailed and correctly identify what needs to be done although it is not always possible to see how some targets will be achieved. Senior staff are not clear enough about the differences between monitoring and evaluation so although the work of the school is now monitored regularly there is too little evaluation of the impact of the actions taken. Information gained from monitoring activities is not always analysed or recorded accurately or rigorously enough and as a result some of the judgements the school makes about its own effectiveness are too generous. The senior team are currently too dependent on external evaluation. When weaknesses are drawn to their attention they react positively and take the required action but they do not check and review their work robustly enough.

The IEB was formed in February 2008. Board members receive regular reports from the headteacher and meet regularly to review progress. However, information about the school is not evaluated critically enough. The IEB has a very positive view of the improvement process and some of its judgements are inaccurate. As a result some weaknesses are not tackled with sufficient urgency. The IEB does not always assess potential risk before making decisions and decisions are not always the result of secure strategic planning. For example an additional assistant headteacher was employed because two candidates had equally strong but different skills at interview. The IEB took this decision in order to 'strengthen leadership'. There is no evidence to suggest that a larger leadership team will be more effective given that the new assistant headteachers are not experienced senior leaders and that they will be responsible for aspects of school improvement previously carried out by the associate assistant headteacher. The IEB is aware that the school is badly resourced and that teaching is not yet good enough but it does not appear to have considered allocating further resources to these areas rather than to leadership and management. Although some progress has been made the pace of improvement is not yet brisk enough and strategic planning and school self evaluation require significant improvement. Despite benefiting from a great deal of additional funding and support the school is not yet demonstrating the capacity to improve.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the leadership and management of the school at all levels – satisfactory

External support

The LA has provided a great deal of financial support. They have secured the services of a National Leader of Education to lead the school until a substantive headteacher is appointed and applied for a grant which funds the work of the non-teaching associate assistant headteacher. The LA is underwriting the salary of a temporary teacher employed to cover long-term staff absence and it has deployed a

recently retired headteacher, on a part time basis, to help the executive headteacher to manage issues around the forthcoming reorganisation of schools in the area. The link inspector visits the school regularly in order to evaluate some aspects of provision and to check that planned actions are completed and LA inspectors and members of the senior leadership team have carried out joint observations of teaching. The school benefits from additional visits from the SIP. The SIP has provided a great deal of useful help and support and he has an accurate view of the schools' strengths and weaknesses. He is firmly focused on the most important areas for improvement and has established a productive working relationship with the headteacher who values the support and challenge he provides. However, despite this very good package of additional resources the school is not improving quickly enough. The LA states that it has adopted a 'hands off' approach to this school because it has delegated responsibility the executive headteacher. While there is some merit in this approach the LA must also ensure that the additional resources they provide are having the desired impact and that the leadership of the school, at all levels, is effective.

Priorities for further improvement

- *Accelerate pupil progress by ensuring that the work pupils are given meets their needs.*
- *Improve the subject knowledge of teachers in order to improve assessment and provision.*
- *Ensure that leadership is strategic and evaluative and that judgements made about the school are based on accurate interpretation of data.*