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17 November 2008

Mrs L Speed
Headteacher
St James' Church of England Primary School
Lyme Street
Haydock
St Helens
Merseyside
WA11 0NL

Dear Mrs Speed

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St James' Church of England Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 13 and 14 November 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 February 2008. 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 – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed only with the permission of the lead inspector.

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 Director of Education for St Helens.

Yours sincerely

Judith Clarke
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St James' Church of England Primary School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 13 and 14 November 2008

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, key staff, pupils, a member of the governing body and a representative from the local authority (LA). Pupils' behaviour and attitudes in lessons and around the school were also observed.

Context

Since the previous inspection, two members of staff have left and one has retired. A deputy headteacher has been appointed and is to take up his post in January 2009. In the meantime he is working in the school one day each week. The new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)/Key Stage 1 leader took up her post in September 2008 and has also taken on the role of literacy coordinator. There is one long-term temporary teacher and two short-term supply teachers currently in the school. The governors have not yet had their delegated powers restored.

Achievement and standards

Although standards are slowly beginning to rise throughout the school, especially in mathematics and science, standards in English have not improved. Unvalidated Year 2 national assessments for 2008 show a marked improvement overall from 2007. However, boys continue to not do as well as girls, by a large margin. This is particularly so in writing. Provisional results for Year 6 in 2008, together with school data, reflect an improving picture in mathematics and science but too few pupils still reach the nationally expected levels. Standards in English remain significantly lower than in mathematics and science and reflect a legacy of underachievement. Staff are beginning to tackle pupils' underperformance in writing throughout the school.

New strategies have been introduced to help improve pupils' achievement. Sessions of extended writing are beginning to have a positive impact on the way pupils undertake their writing tasks and pupils' enthusiasm is becoming evident. Staff are encouraging pupils to improve the quality and quantity of their writing. For some pupils, however, and especially for the boys, writing remains a struggle and sustaining their interest and enjoyment is a real challenge. Teachers' marking of pupils' work remains supportive and gives appropriate encouragement but teachers still do not always pick out exactly what it is pupils need to improve further. Moreover, the presentation of pupils' work, handwriting and spelling still remain areas of weakness.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

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

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' behaviour in class and around school is improving. A recent parental survey undertaken by the school shows that parents have fewer concerns about behaviour. There have been no exclusions this year to date. Pupils are now more prepared to try hard in lessons and they are beginning to apply themselves to their tasks better. They are increasingly willing to take on ideas and suggestions from teachers on how they can improve their work. They are beginning to take a pride in their work but do not always remember to present it to best effect.

Children in the EYFS continue to learn to work independently and to make sure they complete the tasks they have set themselves. They are also learning to share equipment and collaborate with their peers. Older pupils are also better at working independently. Their improved attitudes were evident in the way most worked diligently, listening and taking on the ideas and suggestions of the class teacher. An assembly in Key Stage 2 further exemplified this improvement in attitudes, demonstrating how pupils show respect for each other and the church. They listened carefully, responded appropriately to prayers and held a respectful and reverent silence.

At playtime the pupils continue to play happily together, respectfully using the class equipment to give a more purposeful steer to their break time. Consequently, pupils' behaviour is better and lunchtime staff report that lunchtimes are now a lot calmer and pupils are busily occupied.

Attendance remains below the national average. The school has some useful initiatives in place to improve it but these are not yet proving effective. The number of pupils who are absent from school without a valid reason remains high. Punctuality also remains a problem for some pupils.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning – satisfactory

Quality of provision

The overall quality of teaching is improving with a noticeable increase in the proportion of good or better teaching. Nonetheless, there remain pockets of underachievement and gaps in pupils' learning. Writing remains an area of significant weakness. Teaching in this area is developing but more remains to be done to improve the progress pupils make and the standards they reach. Teachers' planning of lessons has improved and is now much more consistent across the school. The involvement of pupils in assessing their own learning is improving so that pupils are beginning to understand exactly what they need to do to improve

further. Better quality resources and displays are used by teachers to prompt pupils in their learning and guide them how to improve their work. Teaching assistants are now attached to particular classes. This is enabling them to give additional help to more pupils than before. In addition, teaching assistants now lead 'catch up' sessions in English and mathematics to improve pupils' understanding of basic skills.

The school is implementing the new primary curriculum. However, it recognises that it is still in the early stages of working towards its aim of a more skills-based curriculum. Sessions like 'Wake up and Shake up', physical education, and information and communication technology lessons are helping to improve pupils' enthusiasm for learning and school.

EYFS provision has improved well with the arrival of the new EYFS leader. She has reorganised accommodation and provision, and has overhauled the planning and assessment procedures. These are now more accurate and more tightly focused on the areas of learning identified as weak from initial assessments. Emphasis is being placed successfully on developing children's personal and social skills so that they can become independent learners. Speaking and listening skills have also been a target for improvement to extend and develop children's skills in thinking and self-expression. This is beginning to help them explain their ideas clearly and also listen and value ideas shared by others.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality and consistency of teaching and learning, eradicating inadequate teaching – satisfactory
- Improve the quality of the curriculum and the overall provision within the EYFS – good

Leadership and management

The headteacher has secured significant improvements since the last inspection. Staffing is now much more stable. The newly appointed literacy coordinator has already provided training for staff on improving pupils' writing. Staff have found this professional development invaluable in helping them to improve their teaching. The transition arrangements for the newly appointed deputy headteacher is enabling him to work with the headteacher to gather information, share ideas and begin to get a secure knowledge and understanding of pupils in his class. The addition of these two key posts has significantly strengthened the leadership of the school. Plans are also already in place to strengthen the leadership even further with the appointment of an inclusion manager.

The professional support from a nearby outstanding National Support school continues to aid improvement. It allows the headteacher and staff to continue accessing valuable support and also enables them to observe excellent practice in teaching. Monitoring of standards and achievement and teaching and learning have a higher priority and information is being increasingly used to identify trends and specific needs. This drives the agenda for school improvement at a brisker pace.

The governors have had presentations from key subject coordinators. As a result, they now know what needs to be done to improve further. They continue to be committed to the school. Governors are now becoming far more knowledgeable, are accessing training and are determined to make sure that when their delegated powers are returned they are in a position where they can move securely forward.

The school and the diocese have also worked hard to make significant improvements in the accommodation. This has improved the quality of the learning environment.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the leadership and management at all levels, including governance, in rigorously monitoring and evaluating the work of the school, meeting statutory requirements and ensuring that pupils feel safe – good

External support

The LA continues to support the school well. The school has benefited from a range of LA consultants who have helped to improve teaching and learning. The LA is working closely with the new senior leaders who are committed to improving the work of the school.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve pupils' attendance and punctuality.