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21 October 2008

Miss D Garratt
The Headteacher
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Dear Miss Garratt

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Conway Primary School

Following my visit with Gail Robertson and Trish Walker, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 15 and 16 October 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 since previous monitoring inspection – inadequate.

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 Strategic Director for Children, Young People and Families for Birmingham.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Watters
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Conway Primary School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 15 and 16 October 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, a member of the interim executive board (IEB), the subject leaders for English and mathematics, the senior leadership team, groups of pupils and representatives from the local authority (LA).

Context

The headteacher and deputy headteacher joined the school at the beginning of the autumn term 2008. Two assistant headteachers remain on secondment to other schools in the LA. The Secretary of State has given permission for the LA to replace the governing body with an IEB. The board met for the first time on 6 October 2008.

Achievement and standards

Standards remain very low and too many pupils are underachieving. In each year group a significant proportion of pupils are making slow progress in relation to reaching the levels expected for their age. Just over a third of the pupils are on course to achieve average levels by the end of each key stage. In some year groups standards are exceptionally low and rates of progress are extremely slow, for example in writing in Years 4 and 5 and in mathematics in Year 5. The provisional results of the 2008 national tests at Key Stage 2 and teachers' assessments for Key Stage 1 are well below the national average. Apart from in mathematics at Key Stage 2, the results show a decline in standards since the previous year, particularly in Key Stage 1 and in writing in Key Stage 2. Work in pupils' books reflects the overall picture of slow progress with too many pupils failing to show real tangible gains in their knowledge and understanding.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- raise standards and increase the rate of pupils' progress throughout the school, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

The pupils behave well and have positive attitudes. They try to do their best even when their work is too easy or too difficult. They have a strong work ethic and are eager to improve their skills and knowledge. The pupils show respect for each other and the adults who work with them. They are tolerant and good humoured, enjoying opportunities to talk about their work. On the occasions, when they are restless and inattentive in lessons, activities fail to engage their interest, lack relevance and aspirations for the pupils' achievements are too low.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning remains fragile and is not improving at a sufficiently speedy rate. There has been a decline in the proportion of good lessons, from 23% to 4%, with 58% of lessons judged satisfactory and 38% inadequate. Significant weaknesses in teaching and learning remain and there has been very little improvement since the last inspection. Teachers' assessments are often inaccurate and unreliable and in too many lessons the pupils' work is not matched well enough to their different starting points and capabilities. Consequently, the more able pupils are frequently given work to complete which is too easy, whilst other pupils struggle because they do not understand what they have been asked to do. In some lessons teachers' subject knowledge is weak and lesson introductions are far too long. The pace of learning is very slow and the lesson content is often uninspiring.

The quality of teachers' marking is inconsistent and remains unsatisfactory. As reported previously, some teachers' comments give clear guidance to help pupils improve but in too many year groups, particularly in writing books, the pupils' work is not checked sufficiently and common errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation frequently go unchecked. There are still too many occasions when teachers are over generous in their praise of work that is of poor quality.

When teachers' expectations are high, the pace of learning is good, the pupils' work is challenging and supportive and questions are used effectively to probe the pupils' understanding. Lessons are organised well, pupils enjoy their work and are motivated to succeed, for example in a mathematics lesson for the more able pupils in Year 6.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning, including the use of assessment, to ensure that all teaching is good or better – inadequate.

Leadership and management

The headteacher has established a more systematic approach to monitoring the school's work. The quality of teaching and learning is checked frequently and various action plans have been drawn up to tackle the school's weaknesses. The deputy headteacher is providing intensive support to all teachers and helping the headteacher observe lessons. Staff development and training are given a high priority, particularly in relation to improving teaching. These actions are appropriate but not having the impact that is required in order to bring about improvements at a more rapid rate.

The school's assessment information is often inaccurate, which means that there is not a clear or sufficiently reliable picture of pupils' progress and attainment. Consequently, it is difficult to set meaningful and challenging targets for improvement. Teachers' assessment of pupils' progress and their achievements is

weak and is not based on a secure knowledge and understanding of National Curriculum levels. This has been recognised by the headteacher and deputy headteacher, and the LA has set in place a comprehensive package of support to eliminate the weakness. This action is timely as there is an urgent and pressing need to ensure that accurate and reliable assessment information is used by the school's leadership to monitor and evaluate the impact of initiatives in relation to raising achievement.

Monitoring and evaluation remain inadequate because actions are not having enough impact on eliminating persistent weaknesses in teaching nor raising achievement levels at a sufficiently speedy rate. Despite a range of intensive support from the deputy headteacher and other advanced skills teachers from the LA, lesson planning and the use of assessment to provide suitably challenging work for all pupils remain weak. There are significant inconsistencies in the written feedback to teachers about the quality of their work. Important development points are not translated into precise targets for improvement and too often weaknesses, which have been highlighted, have not been followed up in subsequent observations. On occasions evaluations of the quality of teaching are misleading and do not reflect an accurate picture of the evidence gathered by the school.

The role of the senior leadership team and the subject leaders in English and mathematics is underdeveloped and inadequate. The impact of the work of senior staff is limited because they do not yet have the skills required to bring about sustained and lasting improvements in the subjects and year groups for which they are responsible. Currently there is not a sufficiently clear remit for the school's senior leaders, including the headteacher and deputy headteacher, which shows what they are expected to do and how their work will be evaluated in the short and medium term.

The introduction of an IEB has stabilised the school's governance and has the potential to provide a clear and unequivocal lead in establishing effective and good quality leadership and management at all levels.

The school is in a precarious position. Despite a range of generally well focused mentoring and support for the headteacher, the school's leadership is struggling to make a sufficiently positive impact in eliminating weaknesses in teaching and learning, improving the skills of middle managers, and increasing the rate of progress for all pupils. The LA recognises that the school is facing a significant challenge to improve the quality of education and has committed extensive additional resources to aid the school's recovery.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- improve leadership and management and ensure procedures for monitoring and self-evaluation are robust and rigorous in securing rapid improvements in pupils' progress – inadequate.

External support

The LA has revised its statement of action in line with recommendations made by HMI at the time of the previous monitoring inspection. The introduction of measurable and quantifiable targets for improvement has strengthened the LA's capacity to monitor and evaluate the school's effectiveness. The LA monitoring and intervention group (MIG) meet regularly to keep a watchful eye on the school's progress. A range of LA officers and consultants continues to work with the school's leadership, including mentoring support for the headteacher. When challenged during this inspection, the LA responded positively and took immediate action to provide additional help and support for the school. Nevertheless, the impact of the LA's work in tackling the school's most pressing priorities, particularly to eliminate weaknesses in teaching and learning, has been limited.

Priorities for further improvement

- As a matter of urgency, introduce an accurate benchmark of the standards reached by each pupil in writing, reading and mathematics by implementing a coherent and rigorous system for assessing pupils' attainment and progress, ensuring that teachers' assessments are reliable and valid.