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20 November 2008

Mrs Jackie Lapsa
The Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Lapsa

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Vernon Terrace Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 18 and 19 November, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in October 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 – satisfactory.

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 Northamptonshire.

Yours sincerely

John D Eadie
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Vernon Terrace Primary School

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 18 and 19 November 2008

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work in all classes, scrutinised assessment data, pupils' work and other documents, and met with the headteacher, other key staff, a group of pupils, the chair of governors, and representatives from the local authority.

Context

There have been three further changes of staff since the last monitoring inspection and one of these new staff has had substantial time off school with illness. The deputy headteacher has officially taken up her post, having been appointed as a teacher last term, and there is now a settled leadership team. As well as the children who joined in September at the normal time in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), a further 27 pupils have joined in all classes since then, almost all of these with English as an additional language.

Achievement and standards

Visits to lessons and analysis of pupils' work confirm that pupils' progress continues to improve. The school's tracking systems bear this out as they show that progress is now more uniform across the school, with no particular year groups that are a concern. This reflects the more consistent picture of the quality of teaching. Improved progress has begun to redress past underachievement. More pupils than were observed at the last monitoring inspection are now working at age related expectations, although there are still too many who are not and standards remain low.

Standards reached in the national tests by the pupils who left from Year 6 at the end of last term exceeded the targets set for these pupils by the local authority in their statement of action. However, these targets did not sufficiently take into account their poor achievement lower down the school and more challenging targets needed to be set. Targets set for the current Year 6 are significantly more demanding. Performance in mathematics was particularly pleasing and showed a considerable improvement from the very low 2007 figures, although standards in English fell back.

The EYFS was not a focus for this inspection. However, the results of the Foundation Stage profile of those children who were in Reception last year were analysed. This showed that the systematic approach to learning phonics has been effective as children's scores in linking sounds and letters were closer to average than other areas of learning. Analysis revealed weaknesses in these children's emotional development and in their language for communication and thinking and physical

development. The school has recognised this and is working hard, in particular to improve children's emotional development.

The support for pupils for whom English is an additional language has improved significantly and these pupils' progress has improved as a consequence. Pupils with a hearing impairment continue to make good progress in the development of their language skills and are fully integrated into the school.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve pupils' progress and the standards pupils attain in all subjects – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

This aspect was not a focus of the inspection as pupils' personal development and well-being was judged as satisfactory when the school was made subject to special measures. However, improving attendance and punctuality was an area identified for improvement at that inspection and this was investigated. The school has worked hard to gain the trust of families of persistent absentees, supported well by the local authority's education welfare officer. Attendance continues to improve and is approaching the challenging targets set by the local authority, although it is still below average. Punctuality is also improving, partly because the school has a new entrance which makes latecomers more obvious. The school works hard to persuade families of persistent latecomers of the importance of prompt arrival at school and this is having an impact.

Pupils' attitudes in class are generally good, largely because pupils find their lessons interesting. Pupils are polite and keen to share their successes and talk about what they are learning. Behaviour is usually good, both in and around the school. In particular, those pupils with behavioural difficulties are managed very well and rarely disrupt the learning of their classmates. Part of the reason for this is the newly instituted nurture group which is enabling these pupils to learn to cope better with their difficulties in relating to others.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- work more closely with parents to improve pupils' attendance and punctuality – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

There have been a few blips and some inadequate teaching has been observed since the last monitoring inspection. However, leaders and teachers have learnt from this and all teaching observed during this inspection was at least satisfactory, and more than half was good. This is the key reason for pupils' improved progress as there is now greater consistency in teaching and there are good features to teaching in all classes. Teachers now have higher expectations of what pupils can achieve. This is also true of their expectations of pupils' behaviour, where high standards are

consistently set. The greater involvement of pupils, confirmed in conversations with them, is clear in the good and regular use of paired and group discussions observed during this inspection.

Improvements to assessment continue, with more consistency in the way teachers use and share pupils' targets. Older pupils are beginning to be involved in monitoring progress towards their targets, which gives them greater responsibility for their own learning. Marking continues to improve and, when teachers mark pupils' work, they are more often giving pupils time to respond to comments made.

Planning to meet pupils' individual needs, both in the curriculum and in lessons, is developing well. In particular, the effectiveness of giving extra support to groups to help those in danger of falling behind is monitored closely to see if it is having the planned impact.

Although care, guidance and support were not a focus of the inspection, the recent development of a nurture group has made a good start at helping those pupils who find the constraints of the classroom difficult. These pupils are now much happier to come to school and are beginning to enjoy their education.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- ensure that teaching and the curriculum are closely matched to all pupils' needs and that teachers' expectations of all pupils are high enough – satisfactory
- provide all pupils with clear guidance that helps them to improve their performance and to take more responsibility for their learning – satisfactory
- as a matter of urgency, fully implement government requirements for safeguarding – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The headteacher, ably supported by her new leadership team, has continued to drive improvements. There is a very positive feel to the school and a real sense of shared responsibility to make improvements to pupils' progress and the standards being reached. Subject leaders, particularly those for English, mathematics and science, are now leading developments in their subjects well as they have been empowered through local authority support.

The school improvement plan, based on a good analysis of where the school needs to develop, is clear and thorough. It has been instrumental in enabling improvements, for instance in raising standards in mathematics. A particular strength of leadership and management is the way that leaders have not tried to make too many changes too rapidly. They rightly recognise that, until and unless improvements are firmly embedded, any change of focus is likely to be counterproductive.

The local authority has provided training for governors in their roles and responsibilities. This has led to governors being much more focused and has added to their enthusiasm a good knowledge of what they should do to support and challenge the school. Further training has widened their understanding of monitoring and evaluation and most have already visited the school to meet with subject leaders. This has given governors a greater awareness of what needs to be done to continue and embed improvements.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- rigorously analyse the influence of provision, particularly teaching and the curriculum, on pupils' progress and involve subject leaders fully in this – good.

External support

The quality of support provided by the local authority has improved significantly since the last visit. The two major features that were criticised in the last monitoring inspection report have been addressed well. The local authority has provided finances to enable the school to employ very effective support for the increasing numbers of pupils who have English as an additional language. This is a growing issue in the school and this long-term support is essential. Specific training for governors has also taken place and governors are far more able to support and challenge the school's leaders. The education welfare officer continues to support the school well in improving punctuality and rates of attendance.

The major reason for the increased effectiveness of the local authority is that much of the responsibility for selecting necessary support has been delegated to the school. The two new local authority officers responsible for the school are working closely with the headteacher to analyse and address remaining weaknesses. These discussions have led to tightly focused support which is being effective in taking the school forward. For instance, subject leaders are now competent to manage their subjects. The school has selected to have this monitored termly by the consultants who helped them with their roles and responsibilities, rather than the fuller support they have provided in the past.