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Mr John Searl  
The Headteacher  
Abington Vale Primary School  
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Dear Mr Searl

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Abington Vale Primary School

Following my visit with Frances Gillam, Additional Inspector, to your school on 26 and 27 November 2008, 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 – good.

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 & Young People's Services for Northamptonshire.

Yours sincerely

Peter Callow  
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Abington Vale Primary School

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 26 and 27 November 2008

## Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the interim headteacher, pupils, the chair and vice chair of governors, representatives from the local authority (LA), senior staff and subject leaders.

## Context

The interim headteacher is continuing in post until the recently appointed, substantive headteacher joins the school in April 2009. The deputy headteacher retired in July 2008 and the post is being filled temporarily by two senior leaders working as a job-share. Due to the declining roll there is one less class than at the time of the second monitoring visit. In Year 6 there are 2 classes, but in the rest of the school there is now only one class per year group. One teacher is on maternity leave and the class is being covered by two teachers, as a job-share. Due to the restructuring of the LA the advisers working with the school have changed.

## Achievement and standards

Good teaching and a lively curriculum enable children in the Reception Year to build successfully on what they have learned before. As a result, they reach standards above those expected for their age and they make good progress. By Year 2, standards are above average in reading, writing and mathematics and the progress pupils make is satisfactory.

Underachievement in Years 3 to 6 has largely been addressed. Pupils are now catching up and, with the exception of pupils in Year 5 who have been affected by disruptions to teaching in the past, pupils are back on track to make expected progress by the end of Year 6. Results in the national tests for pupils in Year 6 in 2008 improved on the previous year. Standards were broadly average overall but above average in English. Expectations of what pupils can achieve are higher than at the time of the last monitoring visit and the school has set challenging yet realistic targets to secure further improvement. However, on occasions teachers do not challenge the more able pupils to do their best. This is because sometimes activities do not build well enough on what the pupils have done before and consequently the work they are given is too easy.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve pupils' progress and ensure that all pupils reach the standards of which they are capable – good.

## Personal development and well-being

Pupils feel their school is very good place to be. They feel well-cared for and that their teachers treat them fairly and kindly. Pupils say lessons are more interesting than they were in the past; this makes them want to come to school and to try their best. They behave extremely well, lessons run smoothly and most pupils show a high level of interest in what they are learning. The school council works hard on the behalf of all pupils. They were particularly pleased to be involved in the appointment of the new headteacher.

### Quality of provision

Teachers are now providing the right balance in lessons between pupils listening to explanations and working independently or as part of a group. This, along with time challenges, keep lessons moving at a much brisker pace than at the time of the last monitoring visit and contributes significantly to pupils making greater progress. The proportion of good quality teaching and learning has increased and there is some that is outstanding. Teachers generally make good use of strategies such as 'Talking Partners' to help pupils shape their ideas and share their thoughts. They also help pupils to learn from each other and to take account of the views of others.

Pupils are eager to learn and want to do well. They appreciate the support and guidance they receive, especially the targets in writing and mathematics that they now have for improvement. These targets are making a big difference to how well pupils are achieving. They set out clearly what pupils need to do to improve and pupils are rising to the challenge they provide. Older pupils are becoming proficient at measuring their success and this is helping the pupils to set their sights high and encouraging them to work hard. Although target setting has become firmly embedded, improvement to the quality of teachers' marking has been slower. Some good examples of teachers' marking are evident, for example, in Years 1 and 5 but elsewhere teachers are inconsistent in their approach and written comments do not always tell the pupils how they can do better. In addition, teachers do not check carefully how well pupils respond to the points for improvement and so errors sometimes persist in the pupils' work. Consequently, marking is not as beneficial as it might be.

Teachers have developed a much more secure understanding of how well pupils are doing. They know the levels the pupils are working at and use this information to plan activities that now match the pupils' needs more precisely. In the main, activities challenge pupils to do their best but occasionally the more able pupils are capable of doing better. This is particularly the case where teachers overuse worksheets. These worksheets restrict the more able pupils' opportunities to plan and organise their work and to decide on the most suitable means of recording their findings. These are features seen more often in subjects other than English.

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 expectations of all pupils are high enough – good
- provide all pupils with clear guidance on how to improve their performance – satisfactory.

## Leadership and management

The interim headteacher is providing strong leadership and a clear sense of direction for the school which is leading to a faster rate of improvement. He has successfully raised the expectations of staff and governors of what pupils can achieve so that they are making much more progress than formerly and standards are rising. He has secured the involvement and commitment of the whole of the school community, including parents, so that there is now a willingness and ability to provide a higher quality of educational provision. There is a tangible 'can do' attitude of teachers and leaders.

By putting in place good systems and structures, such as the setting of targets in writing and mathematics, rigorous pupil tracking and pupil progress reviews, the interim headteacher is building the capacity of the school for further improvement. Of particular importance is the improved training which is leading to a greater confidence of senior and core subject leaders. This has considerably strengthened the leadership and management of the school. They have grown in confidence and are taking up a much more influential role in promoting good teaching and learning and ensuring that all pupils reach the standards of which they are capable.

Having been coached by the interim headteacher, the senior leaders, who are all team leaders, are successfully leading pupil progress interviews and holding teachers to account for the progress made by pupils in their classes. Pupils at risk of underachievement are identified and support strategies put in place where necessary. By making good use of assessment information on pupils' entry to and exit from any intervention programmes, the leadership team has a clear understanding of their impact in raising standards. In a short space of time the acting deputy headteachers have risen to the challenges of their position and are developing a better overview of the school's performance. In particular, they are taking the lead on developing a more integrated approach to the curriculum to motivate and excite pupils of all ages.

Through the training given by the interim headteacher, leaders at all levels including governors have a greater knowledge of pupils' assessment information and how they can compare it with that of similar pupils in other schools. This has helped to establish higher expectations and to make clear that it is a collective responsibility to enable pupils to reach the much more challenging end of year targets that are now being set. A recently introduced calendar of key assessment dates is helping to ensure that teachers and leaders remain focused on all pupils reaching these targets.

Subject leaders in English, mathematics and science are now accurately identifying the strengths and weaknesses through careful scrutiny of teachers' planning and pupils' work, and an analysis of the data on pupils' performance. As a result, they are providing individual feedback to teachers and leading staff meetings to help improve their performance and the school's. For example, ensuring greater challenge for pupils' learning, particularly for the more able and consistently identifying the ways in which pupils can improve their work when it is marked, have rightly been prioritised.

Improvements to the curriculum are also being made as a result of subject leaders' greater involvement in school self-evaluation so that, for example, there is an increased emphasis on an investigative approach to the learning of science and in mathematics there is a greater emphasis on problem solving and data handling. Lesson observation by subject leaders is still not sufficiently used as a means of evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and the curriculum and its impact on pupils' progress. Senior leaders, however, are regularly carrying out lesson observations and with a current focus on the foundation subjects to ensure that pupils not only receive a broad and balanced curriculum, but one that engages them. Pupils are already saying that they are finding lessons much more interesting than formerly.

Governors are increasingly making a stronger contribution to the leadership of the school as a result of attendance at training courses, links with subject leaders and the development of a strategic vision to support the aspiration that Abingdon Vale becomes an outstanding school. They undertook a rigorous process for the recruitment and selection of a substantive headteacher and are already engaged in a well-planned induction programme with him to ensure the continuity of leadership of the school.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- develop the roles and responsibilities of leaders and managers at all levels and make sure that they are accountable for pupils' progress – good
- rigorously analyse how teaching and the curriculum influence pupils' progress and take swift action for improvement – good.

#### External support

The LA has continued to provide good support for teachers, leaders and governors which has focused well on the issues identified for improvement at the last monitoring visit. It has monitored the school's actions carefully through the Task Group and a school review in early November. Consultant support has rightly concentrated on strengthening the school's capacity for improvement through work with senior and subject leaders.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- Provide teaching that ensures sufficient challenge for more able pupils in all lessons.

- Ensure a consistency of good quality marking that routinely indicates to pupils how they can improve their work and reach their targets.