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18 September 2008

Mrs Sue Pelham
The Consultant Headteacher
Canford Heath Middle School
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Dear Mrs Pelham

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Canford Heath Middle School

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

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

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, chair of governors, chair of the joint strategic committee, and the Interim Director of Children's Services for Poole.

Yours sincerely

H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Canford Heath Middle School

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the consultant headteacher, deputy headteacher, assistant headteachers, year leaders, inclusion leader, groups of pupils, the chair and vice chair of the governing body, who were also members of the interim strategic committee, and two representatives from the local authority. A telephone conversation was held with the local authority's Head of Strategy, Quality and Improvement.

Context

The headteacher resigned shortly before the school's inspection, in March 2008. The headteacher from the adjacent first school was appointed as consultant headteacher from 1 April. After the inspection, the local authority approached the governing bodies of both schools to propose that the two governing bodies federated to form a single governing body, with the consultant headteacher becoming the executive headteacher of both schools. Both governing bodies voted in favour of the federation. During the summer term, an interim strategic committee was established and the required consultations were carried out with staff and parents. The formal process of setting up a single federated body is due to be completed within the next month. Five experienced teachers joined the school staff in September 2008, including the two assistant headteachers. The deputy headteacher returned to school in September following a period of medical leave. There have been significant changes in both senior and year group leadership.

Achievement and standards

The visit focused on achievement and standards in English and mathematics. Science was not monitored on this visit. Standards remain below average, as they were at the last inspection. Results in 2008 national tests for Year 6 were similar to those of the previous year. This year group did not make satisfactory progress given their average attainment when they first joined the school.

During the visit pupils were making satisfactory progress in most lessons. However, many pupils in Years 5 to 7 have a lot of ground to make up, especially in basic English and mathematic skills, due to their past underachievement. Pupils' progress is better in Year 4, where pupils' learning has been supported by an effective transition between Year 3 and Year 4. This has resulted in good continuity of

experience for these pupils, greatly helped by three staff from the first school, including the year leader, transferring with them.

In addition to the changes in teaching staff from this term, new procedures and approaches have been put in place that are designed to lift pupils' learning and enjoyment. These include a new rewards system and behaviour policy and a helpful checklist for teachers, which gives clear criteria for effective teaching and learning. Teachers are beginning to focus on these although, at this early stage, with varying levels of success. A sound start has been made but it is too soon to see the impact of the new initiatives and new senior leadership on standards and achievement at this first visit.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2008:

- raise pupils' achievement and standards, especially in English, mathematics and science – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Many pupils comment that their enjoyment in learning is improving because they are finding lessons more interesting. Year 6, for example, enjoyed the role play during the introduction to their World War 2 work and Year 4 pupils were enthusiastic about using drama at the start of their Ancient Egypt project. Not all pupils are comfortable about becoming more actively involved in their own learning, however, because they lack this experience. Pupils recognise they are being expected to work harder this year and they are positive about this. They feel that behaviour has improved and they like the new reward system. They value the opportunity to mix together anywhere on the playground and find, through this new approach, they are making wider circles of friends. Year 4 pupils confirm that they have settled quickly into the school and comment positively on their smooth transition. Pupils' understanding of their progress remains limited because assessment and marking rarely provide them with guidance about how they can improve their work.

Quality of provision

Recent staff appointments have strengthened the quality of teaching. During the inspection, several lessons were observed which engaged pupils' interest well and stimulated better learning. Stronger staff morale is also leading to teachers enjoying their work more, so relationships are becoming more positive and pupils are responding increasingly enthusiastically to their lessons. Even so, the quality of teaching varies very widely and remains too inconsistent. Some teachers include opportunities for talk and discussion, but pupils' skills in interacting together remain underdeveloped. Nevertheless, these opportunities do not occur routinely, so some pupils still listen for long periods while the teachers talk. This restricts their learning and enjoyment. Although teachers are now more aware of what is expected when planning lessons and receive more support from senior leaders, most work is not yet planned finely enough to match the needs of all pupils.

Despite teachers' and teaching assistants' best efforts, pupils work very slowly, particularly, although not exclusively, in lower ability sets. This is because teachers' expectations have been too low in the past and these pupils are not in the habit of concentrating for sustained periods or persevering. In the better lessons, teachers pick up on this and intervene when necessary. On the whole, pupils' progress during the lessons is not monitored well enough to ensure that all pupils remain engaged and work at a pace to promote good progress.

Teachers' deployment of their teaching assistants remains variable. In some cases, assistants provide effective, often subtle, intervention to re-engage pupils who are reluctant to cooperate and ease them tactfully back to learning. Others give well focused support to less able pupils. In contrast, some teaching assistants are not always effectively deployed during lessons. They sit and listen to the teacher alongside the pupils, for example, and miss opportunities to promote pupils' learning.

Subject leaders in English and mathematics have begun to set up a new system to track and record pupils' progress in English and mathematics, based on half termly assessments. The school rightly recognises that these new tracking arrangements need to be based on accurate, secure assessments if they are to give a clear overview of how well pupils make progress over time. Some training has already taken place and there are further appropriate plans in place to support teachers in assessing pupils' current levels of attainment. Senior leaders recognise that a better tracking system, underpinned by robust assessments, is a necessary first step before pupils can be set meaningful targets.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2008:

- ensure greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning, improving, particularly, the way teachers engage pupils' interest and match learning to their individual needs – satisfactory
- establish a coherent strategy for tracking pupils' progress throughout the school, so that teachers and their assistants can sustain pupils' achievement effectively – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

Since the inspection, the consultant headteacher has provided clear and astute leadership. During the summer term, she focused on important and immediate priorities, such as revising the staff structure and recruiting key members of staff. She has successfully established a new, cohesive management team. Senior leaders and year leaders are clear about their roles and responsibilities. Most crucially, the consultant headteacher has played a key role in building the confidence of staff and parents during last term's consultation period and the first few weeks of this term. Unusually for schools in special measures, the school lost very few pupils following the inspection and this reflects the confidence that parents have in her leadership.

The consultant headteacher has had a marked effect on raising staff morale and establishing a shared vision and sense of direction. Many staff report that the atmosphere and culture in the school has changed significantly. Communication is much improved and staff appreciate the opportunity to work more closely as a team. The training days at the beginning of term have been successful in determining the aims and vision for the school and in shifting the focus from the shortcomings of the past to what staff want to achieve in the future.

Senior leaders show determination to address the shortcomings from the inspection and are aware of the most pressing needs, particularly in relation to building consistency in the quality of teaching and learning. However, the senior leadership team is very new and it is too early to judge the impact of its leadership. The assistant headteachers have responsibility for leading English and mathematics. Leadership of both these subjects has been significantly underdeveloped over recent years and there is much to do to develop teachers' subject knowledge, build their confidence, and raise pupils' standards in both subjects.

The school has a detailed action plan to underpin its improvements but this needs refining and sharpening. The timescales linked to the plan are not sufficiently specific and the arrangements for evaluating the school's actions are not clear. This makes it hard for senior staff and governors to monitor the progress the school is making, in relation to its action plan, and to judge whether or not it is on track to come out of special measures within the required timescale.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2008:

- strengthen leadership and management to make sure strategies introduced to improve provision and lift pupils' achievement are successful – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority has provided ongoing support for the school in setting up the new federation. The strategic arrangements associated with the federation have been well managed. Governors have particularly appreciated the advice and information received through the local authority's governor services advisor. This has helped to ensure a smooth transition during this period of change in the strategic management of the school.

The local authority's action plan was evaluated in May and some shortcomings were identified, particularly in relation to the way the plan would be monitored and evaluated. The local authority had not addressed these by the time of this visit. An amended plan will therefore be required on the second monitoring inspection.