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27 November 2008

Mrs Sandra Baxter
Acting Executive Headteacher
Hillcross Primary School
Ashridge Way
Morden
SM4 4EE

Dear Mrs Baxter

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Hillcross Primary School

Following my visit with June Woolhouse, Additional Inspector, to your school on 19 and 20 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

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 the Interim Executive Board (IEB) and the Head of School Improvement at Merton Council.

Yours sincerely

H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Hillcross Primary School

Report from the second monitoring visit on 19 and 20 November 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the chair of the IEB, the headteacher, senior leaders, a representative from the local authority, and talked to parents and pupils.

Context

Since the previous visit approximately half the teachers have left. The school has successfully filled the vacancies with suitably qualified teachers. Good arrangements for their induction and monitoring have ensured that new teachers feel well supported. Consequently, the school runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis. This is an important achievement at a crucial phase of the school's development, and has helped to ensure that it continues to move forward.

Achievement and standards

The validated 2008 Key Stage 1 results show that standards improved significantly and were well above average. Standards were higher in reading and mathematics than in writing, where they were average. The unvalidated results at Key Stage 2 also improved, but not at the same rate as at Key Stage 1, and standards were broadly average. Standards in English and mathematics are both average, but writing, particularly boys', remains weaker than reading at Key Stage 2. This represents much better overall progress than in 2007. Evidence seen in lessons during this visit confirmed that progress is better at Key Stage 1 than at Key Stage 2, where it is satisfactory.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- make sure that leaders at all levels work rigorously to improve achievement and standards, especially in mathematics and English – good

Personal development and well-being

The first visit judged that behaviour outside the classroom had improved and that pupils were enjoying and learning in a safe, happy environment. This continues to be the case. Behaviour in classrooms is good and there is a calm, purposeful atmosphere in almost all classes. Inspectors were particularly impressed by pupils' unflinching politeness and courtesy. Pupils said that behaviour has improved and they enjoy coming to school. Parents confirmed this, but a small minority were still concerned about some individual instances of bullying.

Behaviour at break and lunchtimes was not as consistently good as at the last visit. There were a few examples of aggressive behaviour that were not quickly resolved

by either pupils or adults. Some poor behaviour was observed at lunchtime in the canteen, which was left in a very untidy state by pupils. The school is now monitoring incidents of bullying and poor behaviour, but has not analysed this information to identify particular patterns and address emerging issues.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- deal with instances of bullying quickly and effectively and improve pupils' behaviour when they are outside lessons, so that all pupils are happy to come to school – satisfactory

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching observed during this visit ranged from outstanding to inadequate, and was better at Key Stage 1 than at Key Stage 2. All teaching seen at Key Stage 1 was at least good, and a significant proportion outstanding. Planning was firmly based on an accurate assessment of previous learning. The pace of teaching was good and enabled pupils to move quickly towards independent learning. They were active participants in their learning through such strategies as the use of 'talk partners'.

Teaching at Key Stage 2 was far more variable. No outstanding lessons were seen, about half were satisfactory and one lesson was inadequate. This means that there is not enough good teaching to ensure that pupils build on the much better progress now being made at Key Stage 1. Consistently good teaching was observed in Year 5. The calm atmosphere in these lessons enabled pupils to engage well in learning. There was a balance of teacher input and opportunities for paired and group discussion. Consequently, pupils had time to think and reflect. Satisfactory lessons at Key Stage 2 were often characterised by too much teacher talk and a slow pace. In addition, lesson planning was sometimes not firmly based on an accurate assessment of prior learning.

Teachers are regularly observed by senior leaders and judgements on the quality of lessons are largely accurate. Feedback to teachers is helpful and, as a result, there are some examples of much improved practice. However, the school judges a greater proportion of lessons at Key Stage 2 to be good than inspectors do. Senior leaders acknowledge that there is more to do to ensure consistency of judgements across the team.

Evidence from a scrutiny of books shows that presentation and handwriting are consistently good; this is a significant improvement. Work is regularly and helpfully marked, often stating in great detail the next steps for improvement. All pupils have individual targets which are regularly evaluated, but there has been no summative assessment this academic year. Therefore, senior leaders cannot accurately evaluate the rate of progress at classroom, key stage or whole-school level. Nor can they hold individual teachers to account for the progress of pupils. The impact of this is apparent at Key Stage 2, and remains an area for development from the previous monitoring visit. It is particularly important that this is dealt with before the next

monitoring visit, as the progress of the current Year 6 was judged to be inadequate by the school last year.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve the quality of teaching to provide activities that are suitably challenging for all groups of learners – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The induction and monitoring of new staff is good. All staff now have a very useful handbook and they are given good opportunities to develop their practice. The arrangements for the newly qualified teacher, tutored by the executive headteacher, are exemplary. He has made an excellent start to his teaching career and reports that he feels 'like the luckiest NQT in the country'.

The executive headteacher continues to lead the school in the right direction. She has high expectations and a determination that the school be judged outstanding that is shared by the senior team. However, mechanisms for monitoring the performance of the school are underdeveloped and rely too much on end-of-year test results. This means that the school is unable to evaluate accurately progress on the key issues at regular intervals during the year.

The IEB has not sustained the good start that was evident at the last monitoring visit. It has met regularly and ensured that the school is fully staffed. Appropriate procedures and policies have been put in place, for example, measures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements. However, the IEB has not developed its role in monitoring improvement on the key issues or in holding senior leaders to account for pupils' progress. They have not established sufficiently thorough processes that would allow them to do so. Nor does the recently written school development plan provide the IEB with the information either to monitor or to evaluate the school's performance rigorously and regularly. This is an area for the local authority to consider as a matter of urgency.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- ensure that governors are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities and work closely with all other leaders to bring about improvement – satisfactory
- ensure that both the induction and monitoring of new staff, especially newly qualified teachers, are highly effective – good

External support

The school receives effective support from a range of national strategy consultants. Senior leaders acknowledge that this support now needs to be more focused on specific areas such as the development of teaching and learning at Key Stage 2. Arrangements to develop a shadow governing body are significantly behind the local

authority's schedule. The local authority accepts that it needs to monitor progress against the key issues more rigorously and regularly. This is crucial if the school is to regain the momentum seen at the first visit, and if the local authority's target for special measures to be removed by early 2009 is to be met.