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11 December 2008

Mr Felix Rayner and Mrs Sue Ball
Executive Headteacher and Acting Headteacher
The Winchcombe School
Maple Crescent
Shaw
Newbury
RG14 1LN

Dear Mr Rayner and Mrs Ball

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Winchcombe School

Following my visit with Graham Stephens, Additional Inspector, to your school on 3 and 4 December 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 – good

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly qualified teachers may 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 the Interim Executive Board and the Chief Improvement Advisor for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Maria Dawes
H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of The Winchcombe School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 December 2008

Evidence

Inspectors observed lessons, scrutinised work and documents, and met with the acting headteacher, the executive headteacher, senior and other staff, the chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB) and the School Improvement Partner. Behaviour was also observed during playtimes, lunchtimes and in assembly.

Context

Since the last monitoring inspection, the substantive headteacher has left. The acting headteacher and executive headteacher remain in place as do the acting deputy and acting assistant headteacher. Four new teachers joined the school in September, including new literacy and numeracy coordinators. Two teachers returned to work after maternity leave and illness.

Achievement and standards

Unvalidated results of the national tests taken by Year 6 pupils in May 2008 show that standards by the end of Key Stage 2 have improved in all subjects both at expected and above expected levels. The proportion of pupils achieving the expected level 4 or above in mathematics and science were similar to those found nationally, but the proportion attaining the higher level was much lower. This represented good progress for this cohort of students in mathematics and science. Standards in English, although significantly improved, were significantly below those found nationally and below the school's challenging target. Improvements were also secured in Year 2, although standards were still well below those expected for the pupils' age.

The school has set very challenging targets for all pupils for the coming year in order to address the legacy of underachievement. They have in place a clear tracking system to monitor pupils' progress at very regular intervals and teachers are much more confident at judging standards accurately. Monitoring shows that, since the summer, the overall rates of progress in reading and writing are exceeding the school's expectations. However, this masks some inconsistency between year groups. Pupils in Key Stage 1 have been making particularly rapid progress. On the other hand, progress in reading in Year 5 has been significantly slower than expected. The senior leadership team and class teachers have been quick to identify this and to put in place remedial action, including differentiated guided reading and a focus on comprehension. Overall, children are making less progress in mathematics than in literacy. Again this was identified and more focused teaching and support have been put in place. An intervention programme, 'catch up maths', is planned for January. However, it is too soon to judge the impact of these changes.

A daily focused literacy intervention programme for all pupils has been implemented since the beginning of September. This is having a very positive impact on increasing pupils' ability to read more confidently and many are making rapid progress. All pupils have curriculum targets for mathematics and literacy and are given specific guidance on how to improve. Pupils are more familiar with how these can help them than they were at the last monitoring visit. These initiatives, supported by increasingly good teaching, are leading to improved motivation and progress in lessons. This was confirmed by lesson observations during the visit, although it is yet to show in sustained achievement over time.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- raise achievement and standards in English and mathematics and science
– satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Since the last visit, a new behaviour management system has been implemented across the school and behaviour in class and around the school is good. Pupils' relationships with adults and with other pupils contribute well to the working atmosphere of the school, and in lessons pupils show interest and get on well with their work. Pupils are happy and friendly. In assembly they were attentive and reflective in addition to engaging in hymn singing with vigour and enthusiasm.

The school is rigorously addressing the higher than national rate of absence. A range of actions have been initiated, including celebrating attendance, weekly meetings with the education welfare officer and pastoral manager, targeting of individual families whose children are persistently absent. The school's detailed monitoring suggests that these actions are beginning to have a positive impact.

Quality of provision

The school continues to prioritise the improvement of teaching and learning and regular monitoring indicates that they are being successful. Teaching is better than at the time of the last monitoring visit. Teachers are more confident in their use of the information gained from assessment to build well on what pupils know and can do. In an increasingly high proportion of lessons, work is well matched to pupils' needs and teaching assistants are deployed effectively to support different groups. Occasionally, activities and tasks are not sufficiently challenging, especially for the more able, and tasks are not thoroughly understood by all pupils, which slows the pace of learning. Teachers are clear about what they expect pupils to learn and share this information with both pupils and learning support assistants (LSAs). They use a wide range of interesting activities to motivate pupils and employ praise and questioning effectively to encourage them to greater efforts. In some instances, questioning does not sufficiently challenge pupils to think more deeply or develop their reasoning or understanding. LSAs are proactive and readily respond to pupils' needs by offering further support, guidance and encouragement.

Teachers have established very good relationships with pupils. They manage their behaviour well and provide many opportunities for them to support each other in their learning. Individual targets for learning are set. When these are frequently referred to, both in lessons and in books, pupils talk confidently about what they need to do to improve. For example, in an outstanding science lesson the teacher skilfully used the plenary not only to enable pupils to evaluate their science learning but also to make links to their literacy targets. Marking has improved. There are many instances of very good practice where marking informs future learning well and develops into an ongoing dialogue between teacher and pupil that focuses on ongoing improvement. However, there remains some inconsistency.

Classrooms are attractive learning environments and work is well displayed, with 'learning walls' offering effective support, guidance and challenge. Teachers use the interactive whiteboards well both to motivate the pupils and to ensure that lessons proceed at a brisk pace.

Pupils with learning difficulties who find aspects of English, and especially reading, challenging make good progress because of consistently good teaching in small groups. Work is matched well to their needs and they have the opportunity regularly to consolidate their learning.

The curriculum is under review. The school acknowledges that the creation of a 'curriculum map' to give an overview, and to help ensure continuity and progression, is a priority. It is early days but teachers are now beginning to explore links between subjects and to create more opportunities for pupils to apply the skills they learn, especially writing, in different situations and contexts. The science curriculum has been reviewed and improved with regular assessments and the establishment of a two-year rolling programme to ensure continuity and progression.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) moved into the main school in the summer and has three large, secure teaching areas that are well equipped to ensure that the demands of the EYFS curriculum are met. Children continue to get a good start to their education. Good leadership and management ensure that staff plan and work well together to support the children. Opportunities are provided for them to play and work together in a variety of contexts. Children are happy, settled and excited to explore the world around them. One of the strengths in teaching is the way staff organise activities to make learning fun and relevant for all children.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve the use of assessment information to plan appropriate and challenging work for all pupils – good

Leadership and management

The ethos in the school is very positive, with a culture of openness and teamwork much more clearly developed than at the last visit. The acting and executive heads and senior leadership team have set a clear sense of direction and there is an

obvious commitment to continue to improve teaching and learning and to raise achievement. The school is now in a good position to bring about accelerated progress for the pupils to address their previous underachievement.

The rapid momentum has been sustained on developing the skills of teachers and support staff in the classroom. The senior leadership team, with local authority consultancy support, has continued to put in place a range of training and coaching opportunities that are well received by the staff. The rigorous monitoring of teaching and learning shows that this is paying dividends, with improved teaching strategies becoming increasingly embedded. This has been further helped by key stage teams planning together. Nevertheless, it will still take some time for improvements to become second nature so that they consistently impact on pupils' achievement over time. New literacy and numeracy coordinators joined the school in September. Together with the science coordinator, they have a growing understanding of the strengths and areas for development in their remits and are taking an increasingly proactive role in monitoring provision and supporting colleagues in improving their teaching.

Evaluation and monitoring of the work of the school continues to be regular, robust and accurate. Findings inform changes to the school's action plan and a strength is the degree to which the senior leadership team engages with support, feedback and advice. The IEB continues to support and challenge the school well. Staff, however, express some concern regarding the stability of the senior leadership team and the effect that any changes might have. The IEB and the local authority know that creating a permanent senior leadership team and governing body is a priority. However, the current acting and executive heads are beginning to develop leadership capacity successfully throughout the school in order to secure and sustain improvement regardless of the outcome of any decisions.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve leadership and management at all levels, especially in relation to monitoring and improving the quality of teaching and learning – good

External support

The school has greatly benefited from well-targeted and sustained support from the local authority consultants, the IEB and from the School Improvement Partner's regular evaluations of progress.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure improvements in provision and leadership and management are sustained through the period of securing a permanent senior leadership team and reconstituted governing body.