

14 October 2008

Mrs Julie Newby  
Headteacher  
Marshlands Primary School  
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Dear Mrs Newby

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 13 October 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I am grateful to all your staff and pupils who made me feel so welcome.

This letter 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.

As a result of the inspection on 13 October 2008, the school was asked to:

- ensure that evidence of recent progress in mathematics is consolidated
- ensure that all learners understand what is expected of them from the objectives of each lesson
- continue to develop learners' ability to listen, reason and discuss

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

Standards at Key Stage 1, as measured in average points score, rose in 2006 and 2007 so that the gap between the school and national figures narrowed in those years. Improvement was consistent across reading, writing and mathematics. From the evidence currently available, this improvement does not appear to have been sustained in 2008; the proportion of learners attaining at least Level 2b in reading fell a little from 52% to 45% with no clear change in writing or mathematics. These

fluctuations in attainment reflect the varying levels of skills and understanding with which children enter the school in the Foundation Stage. They illustrate the future challenge for the school in maintaining its recent improvements at Key Stage 2.

In 2007 in Key Stage 1 boys outperformed girls in mathematics and in writing they were closer to girls than is the case nationally, when measured in average points score. This reflects a pattern that occurs elsewhere in the school, and which the leadership team have discussed with the local authority. A number of initiatives are in place which focus on the attainment of girls and which also link to achievement by higher ability pupils.

Only limited information about actual performance in the 2008 Key Stage 2 national tests was available at the time of the inspection. The proportion of learners gaining Level 4 or better in English rose impressively by 18% to 79%, which was 26% above the local authority's target. However, in mathematics there was almost no improvement by this measure and the school was 6% below its target. Nonetheless, the school has succeeded in attaining the national floor target. There has been no real improvement in mathematics in the last two years and this is holding back further progress in terms of learners obtaining Level 4 or better in both English and mathematics.

The current Year 6 began Key Stage 2 with prior attainment much below national expectations. Until recently it was expected that this cohort would finish Year 6 with only about 43% achieving Level 4 in both English and mathematics: following recent increased progress, the school has revised this prediction to 58%. It believes that 79% are on track to make two levels progress across Key Stage 2. The school's tracking system shows higher proportions of pupils making two sub-levels progress in each year.

The ability of the school to remain above national floor targets will depend very much upon its capacity to improve mathematics as well as consolidating the gains in English with weaker year groups to come. As part of the school's strategy for improvement, literacy received much earlier attention than mathematics in order to provide learners with the skills to access wider learning, including aspects of mathematics. The school's leaders are realistic about the remaining challenges in mathematics, especially higher order thinking skills, calculation and problem solving. In general learners become hesitant when asked to think for themselves and the school now has several strategies to reinforce thinking, processing and talking skills across all ages. Effective assessment for learning is only just becoming embedded in mathematics after some recent changes in approach; steps have also been taken to improve the accuracy of teacher assessments.

In English, the much-improved standards are related to much better assessment and tracking supported by differentiated word level and phonics work. Assessment is more able to identify weaknesses, such as in sentence structure and punctuation, which can then be linked to layered targets. However in mathematics the school has

taken longer to get a successful strategy into place, having rejected some approaches as ineffective. Better progress is also related to the new target setting and assessment policy which was introduced in April 2007, including both 'long term' and 'short term' targets. This has led to much better information about how well pupils are doing, so that the headteacher is able to inform the governing body about the school's progress towards its own targets. The school is making very effective use of this structure and its impact is evident in teachers' classroom practice, although more work remains to be done in ensuring that all pupils can meaningfully discuss their attainment and targets. Sometimes objectives and targets are phrased in such a way that learners cannot fully engage with them.

All the teaching seen during this inspection was at least satisfactory with good features, or good overall. Teachers are well organised, plan and assess methodically, and relate well to their classes. Teaching assistants are invariably making a useful contribution. There remains some work to be done in the fine tuning of the use of lesson objectives to provide direction and purpose throughout a lesson, so that pupils retain a clearer focus on what they are learning. In general, there is still a tendency for the pupils to rely on the teacher or other adults to do much of the thinking for them, to which they can then respond within safe confines. This is broadly the problem that the headteacher describes as holding back development in mathematics. Behaviour observed was always at least satisfactory and sometimes good. Occasionally learners in small groups became distracted but this was always restrained. However, a number of learners are still fairly passive in their approach, or content themselves with very brief answers.

The current headteacher took up post nearly three years ago, following a period in which the school had several headteachers within a short period. She has made some significant improvements and the school is now a reflective, learning community that is handling a wide range of initiatives. The school rightly continues to make its first priority 'to raise attainment and accelerate progress.' The senior team has also come together in this period, with new coordinators of key subjects who are now developing well-structured systems to reinforce improvement through monitoring and evaluation. However, it may be another two years before improvements can start to show in all aspects of Year 6 results.

The school has been able to take advantage of several local authority initiatives in supporting its development, including the Intensifying Support Programme and the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) project, and has received good support for literacy. It is making good use of resources from the National Strategies. Despite increasing support, numeracy is still a less certain area of improvement where there is as yet no consistent track record of improving standards.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely,

Adrian Gray  
Her Majesty's Inspector