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Mr Talbot
The Headteacher
Castle Hill Community Primary School
Sidney Street
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Dear Mr Talbot

Fresh Start: monitoring inspection of Castle Hill Community Primary School

Introduction

Following my visit with Paul Canham, Additional Inspector, to your school on 16 and 17 September 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school opened in January 2007.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

During the visit 13 parts of lessons and an assembly were observed. A range of documents were scrutinised and meetings were held with senior and middle leaders, the chair of governors, pupils and the School Improvement Partner.

Context

The number of pupils on the school roll has fallen since the previous monitoring visit and currently stands at 338, including those in the nursery. This has resulted in changes to the organisation of some year groups. There is now one class with both Reception children and Year 1 pupils. Two teacher vacancies at the end of the previous term have been filled. The school remains fully staffed. There are three

vacancies on the governing body. As a result of major building work which is underway, the outdoor area for the reception classes is currently unable to be used and the provision for profoundly deaf and hearing impaired pupils has been relocated on the school site in temporary accommodation.

Achievement and standards

The school's own assessment information and early indications from the provisional results of the 2008 national tests, supplied by the school, show that standards are rising but remain too low and the targets set by the governors have been missed. By tracking the progress that pupils are making on a regular basis, the school is able to show that some pupils are making faster progress and working at the levels expected for their age, but the variations between different year groups and subjects are too wide. This is because there are inconsistencies in how assessment information is used to plan lessons which challenge pupils sufficiently to accelerate their progress and help them catch up. In three of the lessons seen, pupils made good progress because expectations were clear and work provided good levels of challenge; progress was more variable in the other ten lessons.

Pupils understand that they have targets to help them improve, but these are not used systematically by teachers to accelerate the pace of learning in lessons. Annual targets are set for each year group but senior leaders are not using these at the end of the year to hold staff to account for the standards that pupils reach.

Personal development and well-being

Attendance has improved further since the previous monitoring visit because the school takes quick action to follow up any absence, for example through text messaging and telephone calls to parents and carers. However, it remains below the national average. Punctuality is also improving. Fixed term exclusions continue to reduce and there have been no permanent exclusions since the previous monitoring visit. The majority of pupils behave well and speak knowledgeably about the school behaviour policy, although in some lessons pupils become restless when the pace of learning is too slow.

Relationships are positive and the school provides a supportive, caring environment so that pupils feel safe and know there is always someone who will listen should they have any problems or worries. However, a few pupils expressed their concerns that the school does not always fully address issues such as name calling or teasing when it continues to recur. Pupils enjoy taking responsibility such as being on the school council which they say has been influential in making some improvements, for example to school meals and playground equipment. Opportunities to develop pupils' independence in lessons have improved. In the lessons observed there were more activities for pupils to work together in groups and make choices which made a contribution to their enjoyment of the lesson. The manner in which pupils are encouraged to take individual responsibility for their learning however is limited by the inconsistencies in the use of their targets for improvement in lessons.

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

- provide opportunities for pupils to develop their independence and take responsibility for their learning – satisfactory.

Quality of provision

The school's own records indicate that there continues to be an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning with an increasing number of lessons judged as good. Of the lessons seen during the monitoring visit, three were good, nine were satisfactory and one was inadequate. Although this is an improvement since the previous monitoring visit, the proportion of good or better lessons needs to increase further. Senior leaders are aware that more lessons need to be good or better if standards are to rise to the levels expected and pupils achieve as well as they should.

Features of the good lessons seen included high expectations which were made explicit and incisive questioning of pupils by teachers and other adults. A brisk pace was maintained through a good balance of teacher direction and pupil activity. Varied, well planned tasks, such as the use of laptops and board games, interested and motivated pupils because they were well match to their learning needs and interests. As a result, pupils made good progress.

The school has had a focus on ensuring that learning intentions and success criteria are clear and more carefully matched. It has identified that more work needs to be done to ensure this is consistent. In the lessons where pupils make satisfactory rather than good progress, the pace of learning and level of challenge, particularly for the more able pupils, remain an issue.

The curriculum has been planned on a topic based approach to provide pupils with a range of practical activities which will engage and interest them. It is currently under review to ensure that all subjects are appropriately covered, it is being implemented consistently, and there is sufficient emphasis on literacy and numeracy. The school knows it still has more to do to boost pupils' writing skills and a new science curriculum has been introduced this term which includes regular assessments. The impact of actions taken to develop pupils' mental mathematical skills has been varied so modifications are being made. Teachers use information and communication technology well to support learning across the curriculum, for example in literacy and numeracy and during group work.

The school makes particularly good use of visits and visitors, often linked to topic work, to enrich the pupils' experiences and enjoyment. Pupils say that they like the wide range of extra-curricular activities.

Specialist teachers and well trained assistants provide carefully planned and closely targeted support for profoundly deaf and hearing impaired pupils when they are

working in the specialist provision and mainstream classes. As a result these pupils are well integrated into the life of the school.

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

- increase the proportion of good or better lessons by ensuring there is a clear focus on learning in planning and monitoring – satisfactory
- increase the pace of learning and the level of challenge in lessons for all pupils, particularly the more able – inadequate.

Leadership and management

Systems are in place to monitor standards, achievement and the quality of teaching and learning. Middle leaders have been increasingly involved in these activities since the previous monitoring visit. As a result, they understand their roles and responsibilities and are developing a clearer picture of where weaknesses remain in their subjects. They have developed action plans to address identified weaknesses, but the quality of these plans varies. They have been given specific and regular time to monitor their subjects and fulfil their leadership roles but precisely how this time is to be used needs to be planned to ensure that it is used well and has an impact on raising standards and improving the quality of provision.

Although senior leaders understand the overall strengths and weaknesses of the school their evaluation of the school's performance is over generous and too positive. This is because the data that the school has available is not used incisively to evaluate its performance against national expectations. A more robust approach is needed, involving leaders at all levels, which uses evidence to identify not only what has improved but whether it has improved sufficiently and what more needs to be done.

The school improvement plan has been rewritten for the new academic year. It includes more quantifiable indicators against which to measure the success of actions but some lack precision and clarity. The plan does not yet include milestone measures at key points through the year which identify when and how progress towards achieving the targets for improvement can be measured. Crucially, the key target of raising standards and achievement is missing and the long term strategy for sustained improvement is unclear.

The governors have a growing understanding of data which is beginning help them to identify how they can provide challenge but they are not yet sufficiently involved in evaluating the school's performance and planning for improvement.

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

- develop the leadership of middle managers so that they have an impact on improving achievement, teaching and learning – satisfactory.

External support

External support is well received and has made a particular contribution to the development of the middle leadership. There is still a reliance on this external support. Senior leaders need to ensure that they build the school's own capacity to improve by targeting this support where it is needed most, based on more rigorous evaluation and strategic planning.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the proportion of good or better teacher by ensuring the pace of learning and challenge for all pupils is maintained.
- Leaders, including governors, make better use of data to evaluate the school's performance realistically against national expectations to inform strategic planning and target resources effectively.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Kent.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline Krafft
Her Majesty's Inspector