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24 October 2008

Mr Mike Edwards
The Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
Pyle Hill
Newbury
RG14 7SJ

Dear Mr Edwards

Fresh Start: monitoring inspection of The Willows Primary School

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 15 and 16 October 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school opened in April 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

I observed the school's work, including lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and most other members of the leadership team, a group of pupils, a few parents, the chair of governors and two educational consultants from the local authority.

Context

The number of pupils remains steady. There are currently 184 pupils on roll with another 14 expected to join the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in January 2009. The transition headteacher completed her contract at the end of August 2008 and handed over fully to the headteacher and deputy, both of whom took up their posts in the course of the last academic year. Since the last monitoring visit of June 2008, one teacher has left and another is on maternity leave. Two teachers have joined the school.

The building project has been virtually completed but overran so that the school was not as ready to receive pupils in September as it would have wished. The library and computer room have yet to be fully equipped and this fact impedes work for information and communication technology (ICT) and in other areas, particularly reading.

Achievement and standards

The secure platform from which to raise standards, as described in the previous monitoring letter, has been sustained and built upon. Parents, pupils and staff speak of a school that continues to move forward in creating a positive atmosphere, in developing educational provision and in the outcomes achieved.

The school's provisional results from the 2008 national tests, of pupils then in Year 2 and in Year 6, show an improvement over those in 2007 which were exceptionally low. They are still very low however, and much remains to be done to raise standards and ensure that all pupils make at least satisfactory progress.

Children's achievement in the EYFS was not a main focus for this visit. The children in this stage have settled well into the daily routines, and enjoy their work and learning. A good range of activities enables them to make at least satisfactory progress in developing early literacy and numeracy skills. For example, children enjoyed the number games run in the school hall by the numeracy consultant from the local authority. They recognised and used numbers, working in groups sensibly and taking turns well. In relation to children's skills, the school reports 'Weakness in communication, language and literacy continues, with a wide disparity between boys and girls'. Girls' skills are generally higher than boys' in other areas as well.

Pupils' work in lessons and in their exercise books shows that progress is being speeded up. There are still many shortcomings in the quality of pupils' writing and too few examples exist of work that is re-drafted to show 'best' and 'polished' work. In Years 3 to 6, spelling is too often inaccurate, except in the work of the most able pupils. Handwriting can be done with care when this is stressed by teachers. Pupils' reading is improving but is currently impeded by shortcomings in the provision of suitable reading material for pupils to read in class or take home. Some older pupils are still struggling with reading, and the school, with good support from the local authority, is working with these pupils to develop their understanding of phonics and improve their reading skills. Pupils' speaking and listening skills have improved and pupils are increasingly confident to answer questions and contribute their views. Pupils' progress in mathematics is also improving but the use of mathematics in practical, real life situations is still limited overall. Concerns raised during the previous visit about pupils' standards and achievement in science remain. They are beginning to be addressed but the pace of improvement in science has been slow.

The school keeps good records of pupils' attainment. These have been refined since the previous monitoring visit to show more easily how much progress each pupil makes. Analysis of these records shows that the rates of pupils' progress are

increasing, in the main, and particularly for older pupils. Most class teachers set challenging but realistic targets for their pupils over an academic year but this is not uniformly so. Sometimes, challenging targets are set but without clarity about how teaching is to be different from the previous year in order to achieve these more demanding targets. Nevertheless, senior leaders have an overview of how swiftly pupils' standards and achievement will be raised.

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

- Determine the timeframe in which the school is aiming to bring pupils' progress over each Key Stage up to at least satisfactory levels. Make clear how well groups of pupils, as well as individual pupils, are making progress in each of the three main stages – satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

The school's good work to lift pupils' confidence and sense of well-being continues. Whereas, at the first monitoring visit, pupils mentioned good behaviour as one of the best things about the school, they now talk about other elements they value and enjoy, including lessons. Good behaviour, or the lack of it, is no longer foremost in their minds. The playground is a calmer place than before. Most pupils behave well and particularly when activities in lessons are engaging. Many pupils have positive attitudes to their work but, for a significant minority, sustaining concentration or refraining from distracting others is hard. The school's system of rewards and sanctions is working well to motivate pupils and they respond to the 'stages' approach. Attendance has improved this year but is still below the national average. The school is taking stringent action to challenge some persistent absenteeism and improve overall attendance.

Pupils receive good, sensitive personal support. Pupils and parents praise the school for this. Teachers are clearly very aware of pupils' physical and emotional needs and deal with them, as necessary. The school provides a welcoming, safe and secure environment. Child protection procedures are robust. The school has recently been awarded 'Healthy Schools' status.

Quality of provision

The quality of lessons has improved in some respects, particularly in relation to how well teachers ensure pupils' engagement, involvement and concentration. Teaching and learning in Years 3 to 6 are generally stronger than in Years 1 and 2, partly due to pupils' increased maturity but also to the greater effectiveness of lesson planning in the upper years. During this monitoring visit, five of the nine lessons seen were good, two were satisfactory but another two were unsatisfactory.

Expectations of what can be learned in lessons are still too variable and pace is sometimes too slow. In most lessons, activities are interesting and pupils set about

the tasks set with enthusiasm. Occasionally, teaching approaches for a given topic still lack a meaningful context or are not supported with well chosen resources.

Good teaching includes the skilful posing of questions to check exactly which pupils have or have not grasped the key points. Some teachers have yet to develop their strategies for establishing this quickly. Teaching assistants are well briefed and play positive roles in lessons, often working with small groups over specific learning objectives.

The curriculum places a great emphasis on English and mathematics and other subjects are covered but discretely, in the main. Some good examples of work spanning history and English were seen but teachers do not generally exploit fully the potential of such links across the curriculum. Curriculum plans have been drawn up recently that aim to assist teachers in planning topics to link subjects. In view of the building work and the unfinished computer suite, provision for ICT is currently inadequate but the school expects this situation to be rectified shortly. It is too early to judge if the planned improvements in science are effective. Good features exist in the academic support for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities through the many specific interventions provided by teachers and teaching assistants. The school is reviewing its provision for pupils in Year 1, to check that it allows for a smooth transition from the Foundation Stage. The school is also seeking to expand its stock of reading books.

The school is working to ensure the total reliability of teachers' assessments of pupils' progress, through moderation, and with the help of the local authority. Whilst teachers' verbal comments in lessons generally give pupils an indication of how well they are doing and how to improve, the marking of pupils' work does not. Too often, pupils are not given the chance to recognise and correct errors in spelling, for example.

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

- Extend pupils' involvement in lessons, and teachers' use of pertinent questioning to check pupils' grasp of new material – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

Leaders and managers have continued to build the school's capacity for improvement and have begun to speed up pupils' progress. They have gone a long way in securing pupils' and parents' confidence in the school.

The headteacher and deputy head have an accurate evaluation of the current quality of provision. They appreciate that the skills held by staff holding posts of responsibility are not all as sufficiently well developed as they need to be. Middle leaders still do not all have job descriptions that clearly define their roles, neither do they all fully understand how to discharge them. Work to improve this situation is about to take place.

The school development plan, and other existing action plans, are comprehensive but timescales and key indicators of success are not always given clearly enough. The commonly held desire to improve outcomes for pupils and give them the best possible educational experiences is clear amongst staff and governors. Teachers are fully aware of the fact that the school still needs to overcome a legacy of past underachievement and understand that progress must be better than satisfactory so that pupils catch up and reach the levels of which they are capable.

Governors are effective in many ways, in working with the local authority to improve accommodation, in setting up new policies, and in challenging the school over aspects of provision, for example. The governing body has not yet developed a strong enough role in setting the ambition for the school and tasking senior managers to articulate how this ambition is to be achieved, or how it might be altered where necessary. Governors and senior leaders continue to work in partnership with the local community to strengthen educational provision in the area.

The newly built sections and general refurbishment have given the school a boost. All members of the school community relish the bright, airy feel and are eager to further enhance the building with displays.

The school is able to operate with relatively small class sizes and with a few teachers that do not currently carry a full teaching timetable. Governors have yet to establish with senior managers what future arrangements will pertain when funding returns to more typical levels.

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

- Define more clearly the school's expectations of the work of subject and other key leaders in relation to improving the overall quality of provision and keeping pupils' progress under review – inadequate progress.

External support

The local authority continues to providing effective support, most importantly in relation to raising standards in English and mathematics. The school budget has been maintained at above the usual level in view of the Fresh Start and funds have also been made available under the West Berkshire 'Accelerating Progression in Learning' (APL) programme. The school improvement partners and local authority officers and advisers are working usefully with the school on identifying and planning further actions for improvement.

Main Judgements

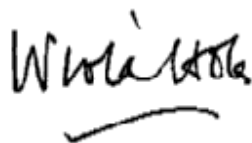
The school's overall progress is satisfactory.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve progress in all year groups so that an increasing proportion of pupils reach the standards that are expected for their ages.
- Ensure that an increasing proportion of lessons provide good learning opportunities.
- Develop marking, increase opportunities for reading, writing, and using ICT and mathematics across the curriculum.
- Define more clearly the school's expectations of the work of subject and other key leaders in relation to improving the overall quality of provision and keeping pupils' progress under review.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of children's Services for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wiola Hola". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a simple horizontal stroke.

Wiola Hola
Her Majesty's Inspector