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Mr Jon Gray
Headteacher
Willowcroft Community School
Mereland Road
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Dear Mr Gray

Fresh Start: monitoring inspection of Willowcroft Community School

Following my visit with Isobel Randall, Additional Inspector, to your school on 3 and 4 December 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 September 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, 10 parts of lessons and an assembly were observed. A range of documents were scrutinised and meetings were held with members of the senior leadership team, a governor, pupils and the local authority school improvement leader. Samples of pupils' work were also examined.

Context

The number of pupils in the school has fallen since the previous inspection. However, the proportion of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, or who are learning English as an additional language, remains the same. There are a higher number of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in the younger age classes. The number of classes has reduced from 13 to 11. All pupils are now taught in mixed age classes containing two year groups. Two teachers have left the school. The chair of governors has resigned and a new chair has been appointed. There are currently two parent governor vacancies on the governing body.

Achievement and standards

Since the previous inspection, the school has received its 2008 Key Stage 2 national test results. The percentage of pupils attaining the nationally expected Level 4 in science and mathematics was similar to the national average. However, the percentage of pupils attaining this level in English was below average. This was due to low standards attained in writing rather than reading. The percentage of pupils attaining the higher levels in all three subjects was well below that seen nationally.

Children entered the Early Years Foundation Stage in September 2008 with standards well below those expected for their age, particularly in communication, language and literacy, and personal, social and emotional development. As a result of good provision, children are making good progress in the Foundation Stage classes.

The leadership team has introduced a good programme to assess the progress being made by pupils in Years 1 to 6. Pupils are assessed six times a year in reading and writing and three times a year in mathematics. These assessments indicate that pupils are making at least satisfactory progress and older pupils are beginning to catch up on ground lost in their earlier years of schooling. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those learning English as an additional language, are making similar progress to their peers. Pupils in Years 2 and 6 are on track to achieve the suitably challenging targets set for them. However, standards remain below the national average in all year groups, with a particularly low percentage of pupils attaining the higher levels.

Since the last inspection the school has further developed its phonic-based intervention programme. This initiative has been well led and managed and good training has been provided to all staff involved in its delivery. The programme has been effective in raising standards in reading but has had less impact in improving writing to date.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in July 2008:

- continue to develop the phonic-based intervention programme to improve reading and writing standards – satisfactory progress

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' good behaviour in most lessons and positive attitudes to their experiences continue to improve their learning. They respond well to clear boundaries that are consistently applied and particularly enjoy teachers' celebration of good work and praiseworthy actions. The atmosphere in lessons and in the playground is harmonious. The school's recent anti-bullying initiative has raised pupils' awareness of what bullying is and how to deal with unkind behaviour. This is supported by pupil playground leaders who take pride in looking after the needs of others. The school council and eco-council, with representatives from all classes, set a good example

for others in taking responsibility within their areas of influence. Pupils' enjoyment of school has brought about an improvement in attendance, with only a few pupils now who are persistently absent. The school has been assiduous in tackling previous problems with attendance and punctuality by forming good relationships with parents and rewarding those who come regularly and promptly to school.

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

- improve attendance – good progress

Quality of provision

Good arrangements are in place to monitor the quality of teaching and learning across the school. A joint observation carried out with the headteacher during this inspection confirmed the accuracy of the leadership team's judgement of teaching and learning. Lesson observations identify good practice and helpful areas of improvement for teachers. Good practice is shared and developed through peer observations and through observations of teaching and learning at partnership schools. This has ensured that the quality of teaching and learning has improved in the school. A clear focus is maintained on learning in lessons through the sharing of learning objectives and success criteria with pupils. Teachers now also routinely check pupils' prior knowledge and understanding, in order to redress weaknesses in their previous learning. Most lessons contain interesting and relevant activities that engage pupils. The leadership team has provided appropriate training for all staff on planning activities for the most able pupils in lessons. Although the planning and delivery of activities to challenge the most able pupils has improved, this remains an area of development for the school.

The school has continued to develop a curriculum in which pupils see the purpose of every activity. Close monitoring of its impact is bringing about continuous adaptation so that areas for concern are identified and improved. Pupils enjoy the more active learning that they now experience, with the result that they are keen to come to school. The curriculum in the Foundation Stage is particularly well planned to serve individual needs and provides a rich variety of experiences to encourage children to settle down well in school. Although the whole school curriculum is well planned to provide for most pupils, there is not enough challenge for those of higher ability. Pupils who are gifted or have specific talents have not yet been identified so that they can be provided with the rich experiences that would help them to flourish.

The school's care for pupils has been further developed by effective links with parents. Measures such as the popular weekly morning club have made parents feel that the school welcomes them, while providing them with an opportunity to discuss issues relating to their children. Children in the Nursery settle down well as a result of having regular opportunities to play with parents and grandparents. The new website is well designed to provide clear information about the life of the school. Parents receive a weekly newsletter and a magazine celebrating good work from all classes. A clear focus on rewards helps pupils to feel that their efforts are well

regarded. Good developments in marking now ensure that pupils are given clear and helpful feedback on how well they are doing and how they can improve their work. The school is assiduous in providing for the safety and well-being of all its pupils.

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

- improve standards by increasing the percentage of good and better lessons – good progress
- ensure that lessons contain sufficient challenge for the most able pupils – satisfactory progress
- ensure that all marking and feedback to pupils gives them clear advice about what they need to do to improve their work – good progress

Leadership and management

The headteacher is relentless in his desire to improve both the academic standards and the personal development of all pupils. He has continued to lead the school well since the last inspection and he is well supported by the developing senior leadership team. Following careful evaluation of the school's position a year after its opening, the raising achievement plan has been rewritten. The plan addresses the priorities for improvement identified during the previous inspection; is well written and now contains challenging, specific and measurable success criteria. Each term, both the implementation and the impact of the plan are carefully evaluated and further issues to address are identified. This systematic approach to the delivery and evaluation of the plan ensures that it is driving improvement within the school.

The English and mathematics subject leaders have been provided with effective support and training. They are now monitoring the quality of provision and outcomes in their subject areas through lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work. This has enabled them to identify strengths and areas in need of improvement. Action plans have been produced to address identified areas of weaknesses. There is now a need for subject leaders to be more involved in the process of collecting and analysing assessment data.

Governors are well informed about pupil achievement, the quality of teaching and learning, and the implementation and impact of the raising achievement plan through regular reports from the headteacher. Governors provide the school with effective support and a satisfactory level of challenge. The school is aware of the urgent need to appoint two parent governors to the governing body and has plans in place to address this issue.

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

- support subject coordinators in their leadership and management roles – satisfactory progress

External support

The local authority school improvement leader has supported the school well in writing its raising achievement plan. The impact and implementation of the plan are effectively monitored and evaluated by a task group chaired by this adviser. This group also coordinates specific support for the school well. Subject coordinators have been provided with good leadership and management support from local authority consultants.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is good.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that the provision for more able and talented pupils is sufficiently rich and challenging.
- Continue to improve standards, particularly in writing.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children Services for Oxfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Peter Sanderson
H M Inspector