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Mrs Jackie Chevaugeon
Headteacher
Blyth Horton Grange First School
Kitty Brewster
Blyth
Northumberland
NE24 4RE

Dear Mrs Chevaugeon

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Blyth Horton Grange First School

Following my visit with Andrea Lyons HMI and Margaret Shepherd Additional Inspector to your school on 7 and 8 July 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in November 2007. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Northumberland.

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
H M Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Blyth Horton Grange First School

Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on 7–8 July 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including 13 part lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the acting deputy headteacher, the deputy headteacher designate, the assistant headteacher, a newly appointed teacher, a newly appointed senior leader, a group of pupils, representatives of the interim executive board (IEB), a representative of the local authority and the school improvement partner (SIP). The inspector also met with a large group of parents.

Context

The acting headteacher was appointed to the substantive post in February 2009. The deputy headteacher has left the school and an assistant headteacher will leave at the end of August. An acting deputy headteacher joined the school in January 2009 who works on a part-time basis. A new deputy headteacher has been appointed who will take up her post in September. A leading teacher has been seconded to the school for two days a week; she will take up a permanent appointment in September 2009 and become part of the leadership team. Staff absence has been high and during the visit four teachers were on temporary or supply contracts. A number of new, permanent teachers will take up their posts at the start of the autumn term. The school will become a primary school in September. Work to refurbish the building is expected to be completed by the start of the new term.

Achievement and standards

When children start school they can do less than is typical for their age. Evidence from lesson observations and from work seen during the visit confirms that they do not progress well enough during the Early Years Foundation Stage. Children have too few opportunities to initiate their own learning and they do not develop independent skills or the confidence to take carefully managed risks. There are not enough interesting, practical activities for children in the Reception classes and there are very few opportunities for investigative or creative work. The outdoor area is not used well enough and does not cover all areas of learning. Teachers do not make the most of opportunities to observe and record the small steps in children's development because they do not use the guidance materials for Early Years Foundation Stage sufficiently well. As a result, some of the activities provided for children are not well enough matched to their age or needs so they do not develop some important skills or do not develop them well enough. School leaders are aware of this and the key stage is being restructured. The planning for this is well advanced.

Teacher assessments carried out at the end of Key Stage 1 show that standards remain below average and that pupils' attainment is better in mathematics than in English. Given their starting points this represents satisfactory progress for some pupils but the school is aware that others have not achieved well enough. Teacher assessments have been moderated by the local authority so the school is confident that the data is accurate. Pupils in Key Stage 2 have been assessed using national tests for pupils in Years 3 and 4. The tests will be marked by teachers and moderated by senior staff and external consultants. By the end of this term the school should have an accurate view of pupils' attainment and can begin tracking their progress and tackling any underachievement.

Work seen in books and in lessons observed during the visit confirms that pupils are making better progress. Most pupils are now working at the expected level for their age and most make at least satisfactory and sometimes good progress during lessons. Weaknesses in the basic skills and a significant legacy of underachievement limit pupils' ability to tackle some work or understand new concepts but the most effective teachers compensate for this by providing useful resources and opportunities for pupils to consolidate new learning in practical situations. Pupils' handwriting and presentation continue to improve and most pupils take pride in their work. The school has implemented a number of strategies to improve pupils' skills and there has been a particular focus on reading. Pupils say that they enjoy this extra support and they feel that they are making progress. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve as well as their peers in lessons.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Raise standards in English and mathematics – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

Pupils behave well in lessons and at lunch and break times. They are polite to staff and visitors and listen carefully to their teachers. They have coped with staffing changes and the resulting turbulence well and they say that the school is improving. Although pupils are happy to talk informally to staff or visitors, many are very passive in lessons and are often reluctant to answer questions. However, when they are given interesting tasks they thrive. Pupils can work with a partner or as part of a small group and most are learning to co-operate and to explain their thoughts or ideas. The school has implemented consistent systems to manage behaviour and most pupils meet the school's high expectations. However, pupils say that a few children do not always consider the needs of others. Pupils say that their achievements are recognised and most say that they enjoy school. Attendance is improving and the proportion of pupils who are persistent non- attenders has declined significantly. However, punctuality remains an issue.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Establish a uniform system to improve the behaviour of pupils - good

Quality of provision

Teaching is improving. There is more good teaching than was previously the case and inadequate teaching is being eradicated. Teachers have been given very good guidance and support and they have worked alongside an outstanding teacher. They now have a better understanding of what makes a good lesson and they are beginning to apply this knowledge in their own work. In the most effective lessons, teacher talk is kept to a minimum and pupils are given sufficient time to work on tasks which will help them consolidate their knowledge and skills. In these lessons teachers have a good understanding of pupils' prior attainment and of the areas which they need to improve. They use day-to-day assessment to plan interesting and enjoyable tasks which meet pupils' needs. Most of these lessons involve practical, problem solving activities and pupils are given resources which help them complete their tasks. This compensates for the weaknesses in their basic skills and helps them to progress with new learning. Pupils become active learners and they respond very positively to questioning. In these lessons pupils thrive and make good and sometimes very good progress.

There are still too few lessons of this quality and some weaknesses remain. The school has implemented strategies to tackle weaknesses in pupils' basic skills. These are very useful and when they are applied effectively they help pupils to improve their work and tackle underachievement. However, these new systems are not implemented consistently or used well enough in all classes. For example not all teachers are using day-to-day assessment well enough so the tasks given to pupils do not always meet their needs and some tasks are dull and do not help pupils to consolidate new skills. Teachers plan lessons carefully and are focused on improving pupils' achievement. However, they do not take full advantage of opportunities to plan their lessons with a partner from the parallel class so they miss opportunities to share skills and expertise. As a result, there is too much variation in teaching between classes in the same year group and pupils' progress is inconsistent. Marking has improved. Teachers mark work carefully and tell pupils what they have done well and how to improve. However, some comments are not specific enough and do not help to eradicate the most important weaknesses.

The curriculum is satisfactory. The school has ensured that it is balanced and that teachers devote sufficient time to each subject. The school is extending the school day in Key Stage 2 to ensure that all subjects can be given the correct allocation of time. Pupils are well cared for but guidance and support are not yet good enough. Teaching assistants do not always provide pupils with well targeted and effective support and information about pupils' progress and needs is not always accurate. The school, well supported by a seconded teacher from a partner school, has recently reviewed the support provided for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school's systems are now robust.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and the curriculum, in particular to encourage more involvement of pupils in their learning – satisfactory

- Make better provision to support pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The leadership of the headteacher is good. She is experienced, skilled and has a very good understanding of the school and of the urgency of its situation. In a very short period of time, she has successfully tackled a number of long standing and significant weaknesses. Although in the short-term this has caused some turbulence her actions have helped the school to move forward. The headteacher has established effective partnerships with other schools and she has seconded some very effective staff into the school. These teachers have significantly improved the leadership and management of ICT, special educational needs (SEN) and the overall leadership of the school. One of the seconded teachers has accepted a permanent position at the school and this together with the appointment of other suitably qualified staff has strengthened the school's capacity to improve. The headteacher is working very effectively with parents. Parents who spoke to an inspector feel that the school is improving and they are happy with the provision made for pupils. They appreciate the extra support which is being provided and they are pleased that the headteacher listens to them and resolves any difficulties promptly.

The acting deputy headteacher is effective. She has supported the headteacher well and she has a good understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. The deputy headteacher designate understands the challenges of her new role and is preparing for it. She attends senior leadership meetings and is beginning to share management tasks with the headteacher. She attended meetings during the inspection and made a positive contribution to discussions. The IEB is skilled and effective. Its members have a very good understanding of the school and of its current rate of progress. The IEB works very productively with the local authority and this has been a significant factor in the school's recent improvement. Board members have drawn up a well thought out exit strategy which allows a new, effective governing body to be fully established within the next two years. It has also identified rigorous quality assurance procedures which will come into being once the school is removed from special measures. The school's self-evaluation is rigorous and detailed. It is shared openly with staff and all members of the school community are clear about their roles in the improvement process. The headteacher's judgements are accurate if a little modest and she has a very good understanding of the school's strengths and areas for development. The school has identified and tackled all of its long standing and serious weaknesses and has established solid foundations. It is well placed to make rapid progress in the coming months.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

- Improve the leadership and management of the school at all levels - good

External support

The school receives very effective support from the local authority. Support is carefully targeted towards the school's most pressing needs and senior officers work closely with the headteacher and the IEB. This support has helped the school tackle serious and long standing issues promptly and effectively. The local authority is helping the school to eradicate weaknesses in the Early Years Foundation Stage. This work has had a positive impact on the provision made for children in the Nursery but timescales have slipped a little in other areas. The SIP provides exceptional support. She makes the best use of her time in school and she has established a very productive working relationship with the headteacher. Her evaluations of the school's progress are accurate and astute and she has made a significant contribution to the school's recent improvement.

Priorities for further improvement

- The school should focus on its existing priorities and ensure that it measures and records the impact of recent changes.