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6 February 2009

Mrs Janet Seddon
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Seddon

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Beech Hill Community Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 4 and 5 February, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in April 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.
Progress since the previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB) and the Director of Children's and Young People's Services for Wigan.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Sonja Øyen
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Beech Hill Community Primary School

Report from the second monitoring inspection: 4 and 5 February 2009

Evidence

HMI observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher in her role as inclusion manager, the phase leaders and a representative from the local authority (LA) who is a member of the IEB.

Context

During this inspection, three members of support staff and one teacher were absent. A temporary teacher along with a teacher from a network school worked with pupils in Year 4. Nine children joined the Nursery on a part-time basis in January. The LA has announced that the school will move into temporary accommodation from September 2009 to allow demolition of the existing buildings and the building of a new school on the site.

Achievement and standards

There are some tentative signs that pupils' achievement is strengthening as a result of provision focused on helping pupils to reach their targets. In lessons generally, pupils make satisfactory progress but standards remain stubbornly low: in the main, pupils are working at a level more typical of pupils a year younger.

The school's analysis of pupils' progress in the autumn term indicates that the majority of pupils are on track to meet their targets by the end of the school year. In some cases, pupils have already met their targets and new targets have been set. For those pupils who did not make the progress expected, a programme of support in reading, writing and mathematics has been agreed.

However, the school is drawing on unreliable information about pupils' attainment. A recent exercise to moderate teachers' assessments of pupils' level of writing drew out some inaccuracy in judgements. A scrutiny of pupils' work by representatives from the LA highlighted mismatches in the level of difficulty in the work set, the progress expected and the target set for the end of the year. HMI scrutiny of pupils' work since September indicated that in some cases, judgements about progress have been too rosy.

The school is making considerable efforts not only to support the lower attaining pupils and those who appear to be stalling, but also to plug gaps in learning for all. The stronger emphasis on letters, sounds and numbers is beginning to pay off. Nursery children remembered key events and phrases from the story, 'We're going on a bear hunt'. Year 2 pupils initially used fingers to help with problems relating to tens up to 100, and then in some cases, began to show an instinctive awareness of

the answer. Pupils in Year 6 talked about how much easier they now found it to recognise new words and how they had learnt their times tables. These are good indications of improvement in achievement.

Some elements of the legacy of previous poor learning are proving harder to resolve. Too many pupils from Year 1 onwards form letters and numbers incorrectly and their work is often untidy. Older pupils' writing often lacks basic sentence punctuation.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and improve pupils' achievement in English, mathematics and science in all year groups – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

The school is settled and there is a positive, supportive atmosphere. Since the last inspection, pupils have gained in confidence as learners. They work well together and help one another. Opportunities for pupils to work with talk partners and to think-pair-share result in little fuss and sometimes animated discussion. Pupils who have particular social and emotional needs benefit from sessions of learning together in the Sunshine Room. Pupils know they come to learn and that their opinion matters. Their comments on the compliments board show how much they enjoy school and appreciate the changes, especially the increased focus in lessons on practical activities and opportunities to work in groups.

Quality of provision

The overall quality of provision has improved although it is not meeting pupils' needs in full or leading to a noticeable rise in standards.

The good provision for the children in the Nursery and Reception class is a developing strength of the school. The staff have acted on advice and drawn on their own ideas to create an interesting and supportive learning environment inside and out. There is a clear focus on developing skills in reading, writing and number as well as encouraging the children to be increasingly self-sufficient. The teachers are quick to adapt to events, such as the arrival of snow, and show flair in providing items and experiences that catch and build on the children's interest. The Reception children made good progress in using 'under', 'between' and other prepositions because of the teacher's probing questions and the practical problem of getting three goats across a bridge made out of building blocks.

Improvement in the quality of teachers' questioning was also evident in other classes. Pupils in Years 3 and 4, for example, gave fuller explanations of the outcomes of their investigations into temperature because the teacher asked, 'How do you know?' and encouraged them to use relevant scientific vocabulary.

Phase leaders commented on their awareness of growing professionalism and enjoyment in teaching. Staff have acted on advice and put ideas into action. Classrooms are bright and well organised. Lessons are well planned and prepared with a clear emphasis on steps to success. All teachers are linking what they teach to pupils' targets which they review each half term. Teamwork has strengthened markedly: teachers and support staff are working together to plan, find resources and share effective practice. The range of support and ways to learn has widened: for example, older pupils use computer programmes before school to improve their facility with number, and there is a more prevalent use in lessons of games, problems and practical activities. Pupils are praised for their efforts and they are asked to judge how well they have done. As a result, teaching and learning are more purposeful than before. However, there are inconsistencies in the teaching that need to be ironed out if the pace of learning is to accelerate and the school is to meet the LA's success criterion of 100% satisfactory teaching with 60% good or better.

Five particular inconsistencies seen during the inspection have a limiting impact on pupils' learning. First, not all teachers are using child-friendly language to explain the purpose of the lesson or clarify exactly what will count as success in learning. Second, some teaching is over directive with missed chances to probe pupils' understanding or to draw on their suggestions. Working through the prepared lesson results in completed tasks and seeming progress but the learning is often superficial in relation to the intended outcomes. Third, limited emphasis on explaining and modelling the use of key vocabulary means that teachers do not always pick up on misconceptions or ensure consolidation of learning through pupils' use of the same words and phrases. Fourth, the potential of the interactive whiteboards as a learning tool is not being exploited, especially for Key Stage 2 pupils. Few pupils, for example, completed their task on the whiteboard. Last, the marking of pupils' work is not focused enough on helping them to improve. In writing, there are too few comments on aspects of structure that will make a difference in overall quality.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Eradicate inadequate teaching so that the overall quality improves enough to ensure that all pupils learn effectively – satisfactory.
- Improve the use of assessment and target setting to help pupils reach their potential – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and deputy headteacher continue to give a strong lead in creating a 'can do' atmosphere. By following the agreed plan of actions, acting on points raised in reports, the school has many of the building blocks it needs to accelerate the pace of improvement. A key task now is to ensure the leadership is as strong in driving up academic standards as it is in pastoral care.

The quality of middle management has improved as a result of support in school and work with consultants from the LA. A good example is the guidance given to the assessment manager to develop skills in collecting and interpreting data. Phase leaders are assuming a prominent role in working with their teams and in discussing pupils' progress. The planned programme to develop their skills in monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning is timely as this weaker aspect is limiting the school's improvement.

The deputy headteacher's work to support teaching for the younger pupils is helping to raise the quality. As inclusion manager, she has tightened systems and ensured all staff know what is expected of them. However, now that the school is running smoothly and general management tasks are spread more widely, her role and responsibilities are unclear.

The headteacher knows well every pupil and member of staff. She places the welfare of the school family to the fore and has taken hard decisions, including lunch-time exclusions for pupils whose behaviour is unacceptable. She has a sound overview of the quality of teaching and has discussed points for improvement with individuals and the staff as a whole. To date, these points have tended to be about generic skills in teaching rather than related explicitly to specific points about the subject that will make a difference to learners' progress in English, mathematics and science. In some cases, teachers' subject knowledge is an issue.

A key necessity is the development of a sharper edge to critical evaluation. Reports within the school and to the IEB are too lightweight. They indicate what has been done but do not provide a justified overview of the impact of action taken, the factors that account for the outcomes and the implications.

The IEB has met monthly and members are holding the school to account. Two members are to oversee duties usually carried out by the governing body in ensuring that the school fulfils statutory requirements. Governors are undertaking training, a few have resigned.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Ensure leadership and management at all levels are strong enough to improve pupils' achievement – satisfactory.

External support

There has been considerable support from the LA, the quality and impact have been good. Teachers have valued the input from consultants in early years practice, numeracy and literacy. The session to moderate pupils' writing was particularly helpful in clarifying criteria to apply. The action plans for this term identify clearly how the consultants will work with phase leaders to develop their management skills. Productive links have been established between teachers in Beech Hill and the partner school, and the two headteachers have come to a working partnership which

is tailoring expertise to need. The headteacher of the partner school compiled a thorough report as a result of her interview to support the assessment manager.

The school has received several other detailed, constructive reports from the LA and Challenge Advisor. The review of standards by the School Improvement Partner identified key areas for concern regarding pupils' progress and targets. The helpful recommendations include some that are easy to implement and others that tie in well with points raised by HMI. The draft report from the recent evaluation conducted by LA advisors provides a critical review of the impact of the work of the LA and school to meet the criteria in the raising attainment plan. The judgements of progress tally with those in this report.

Priorities for further improvement

Two priorities from the first monitoring inspection remain.

- The accuracy of teachers' assessment of pupils' attainment.
- Teachers' marking to help pupils improve their work – to 'up level'.

In addition

- Phase leadership in driving up standards.
- Skills in critical evaluation and report writing.
- The quality of presentation of pupils' work.
- Child friendly targets and learning objectives.