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25 June 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 24 June 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third 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 third monitoring inspection: 24 June 2009

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the phase leaders and a representative from the local authority.

Context

During this inspection, several classes were out of school. The Year 6 pupils were visiting the secondary school and pupils in Years 1 and 2 were visiting Blackpool Zoo. One teacher was absent and her class was taught by the deputy headteacher. Six children have joined the Nursery since the last monitoring inspection in February. The planned move of the school into temporary buildings has been deferred.

Achievement and standards

The school's data indicate that the vast majority of pupils are on track to meet their targets by the end of the school year. Standards are rising, albeit slowly and inconsistently in the school as a whole. Too many pupils in Year 4 have not made the progress they should, particularly in writing.

The children in the Early Years Foundation Stage have made good strides in their learning, especially in early reading and writing. Children in the Nursery show an interest in books and in writing. Some write their name unaided and use random letters when attempting to write other words. In the Reception year, children are using their knowledge of sounds and letters to write labels and simple sentences. From a low start, a good number are now at or close to the level expected for their age in these aspects of learning.

Targeted, focused support has enabled the majority of pupils in Year 2 to reach their targets. All have attained Level 2 in mathematics and almost 60% have reached Level 2B, the level expected nationally. This is a creditable success. While there has also been a rise in the proportion of pupils reaching Level 2 in reading and writing, very few pupils have done well for their age. No pupil has reached the higher Level 3 in any of the subjects.

Pupils in Year 6 have made good progress over the year. Some gaps in basic knowledge and skills remain, especially in spelling and the use of number to solve problems, but most pupils are on track to meet their targets. This bodes well for the school's results in this year's national tests, particularly in English. Mathematics remains the weakest subject, although some pupils have done well for their age. In science, pupils are carrying out simple investigations and recording their findings in reports, charts and diagrams. Year 6 pupils are aware of fair testing but the work

in their books shows little evidence of pupils coming to a hypothesis or posing their own scientific enquiries. Changes in how science is being taught are having a positive impact. There were several 'Eureka' moments for pupils in Years 3 and 4 when, experimenting with items and electrical circuits to create a way for someone on a desert island to signal for help, they found they could make a buzzer and brighten a light.

The work in pupils' books shows a marked improvement in neatness since the last monitoring visit. Regular sessions to practise handwriting are starting to pay off. Year 4 pupils are proud to be given a pen when their handwriting is neat enough.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

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

Personal development and well-being

Pupils enjoy school; they like the praise and interesting lessons that they feel typify a day in school. The school has met its target of 94.25% attendance; classes vie for recognition as having the best attendance over the week. Pupils generally behave well. No pupil needed to use the 'Chill out zone' during the inspection. Exclusions at lunchtime, the opening of the nurture room at lunchtime for a few pupils, and games outside help to sustain a harmonious atmosphere. In several lessons, there was a high level of interest and some excitement. In the school assembly, all sat and listened attentively to pupils in Year 5 who spoke confidently about their year in school, acted out a drama about pollination and talked about their recent work with artists. The tapestry banner and model will go on exhibition within the borough.

Quality of provision

The evidence from the monitoring of lessons by school leaders indicates a strengthening picture with many good lessons; however, despite support and guidance from school leaders and local authority personnel, some teaching continues to give cause for concern. This has led to inconsistent learning for some pupils.

The teachers have acted positively on points raised in the last monitoring inspection to sharpen questioning, marking and the clarity of the purpose of the lesson. In the few lessons seen, teachers used questioning well to draw out pupils' explanations and to encourage them to justify their comments and comment on others' thinking. They shared the steps to success and ensured that pupils knew what was expected of them. A scrutiny of pupils' work in books showed that teachers' marking is also sharper, although still inconsistent in quality across subjects and year groups. There were some very good examples of marking in mathematics which challenged older pupils and engaged them in a dialogue about their findings. Similarly, there were



good examples of what pupils needed to do to 'up level' their writing. Although targets are agreed, teachers rarely indicated to pupils whether they had reached them or shared with them the actual level of their work.

The pattern of assessing pupils' progress each half term is now integral practice. When pupils meet their targets, new ones are set. Teachers and phase leaders have a good overview of how well individuals and classes are doing. They have been effective in allocating support for pupils to ensure they do as well as expected for their age, but this has meant that pupils who show the potential to do well have not always been challenged enough. Personnel from the local authority and partner school have coached staff in attributing a level of attainment to pupils' work, especially in writing, and analysing data from assessments and progress reviews. While this has helped to secure teachers' judgement of different levels of attainment, it has also highlighted the need to refine expertise further in how to question and interpret the data. A small proportion of pupils, for example, have been identified as falling short of their targets each term but the school's analysis does not indicate whether these are the same pupils, whether support programmes have had an impact, where the problems lie and, consequently, the action needed at classroom and lesson level to ensure that these pupils get back on track. The school is aware of the need to refine systems further to provide a clearer picture of pupils' progress.

The school is moving towards a topic-based curriculum at Key Stage 2. Problems around the story of pirates were used well to enthuse pupils, especially the boys in Years 3 and 4, and to link work in science, mathematics and English. However, not enough is being done currently to review what has been done this term and to ensure that teachers start the new school year with well planned topics.

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

Improvement continues but the pace has slowed at a time when it is expected to accelerate as a result of the school's growing ability to drive its own progress. Although morale is good, there is a loss of urgency and confidence of purpose. The school is still looking to outside help to support its work and relying on new facets to be the key to success. The involvement of other personnel through the Greater Manchester Challenge has led to uncertainty as to who is directing the programme of support. It has diluted the focus on specific elements that will make a difference and also extended the timescale. For instance, a programme to develop the expertise of middle managers is planned for the autumn term but there is no

indication of how this builds on existing focused support and coaching by personnel from the local authority. This term, five teachers are participating in a course to develop their awareness of good teaching. While this promises to be useful, it is not specifically tailored to the needs of the school and requires considerable investment of teachers' time. Demands on time have sometimes led to tasks not being done.

Senior and phase leaders have been monitoring the quality of provision and working with staff to ensure greater consistency of approach. Their reports have identified individual and common areas to improve and action has been taken to support staff. As a result, there is a closer adherence to policy and a heightened awareness of what makes a good lesson. Paired observations have helped to secure judgements and to draw attention to links between teaching and learning. Staff appreciated the observations conducted with the school improvement partner as these were helpful in pinpointing new elements. Judgements about the quality of the lesson are shared but not always formally recorded. This is partly because the format of reports varies as does the identification of specific points that will raise the quality of the teaching and learning. The deputy headteacher's reports are good exemplars of detailed, constructive reviews of the effectiveness of a lesson and what could be done to improve it. As noted previously, observers are not revisiting teachers quickly enough to check that agreed developmental aspects are being acted on.

Impending changes in staffing provide a useful opportunity to realign the role and responsibilities of the deputy headteacher and to ensure that her skills and proven expertise are used to balance those of the headteacher.

Governors have undergone some training but are not playing an active role in the running or life of the school. The proposed attendance of shadow governing body members as observers at the meetings of the Interim Executive Board is a useful development. The headteacher reports to the board are informative but still lack a critical edge. They do not make clear enough the impact of action nor bring out the implications. As a result, the reports may indicate a more positive line than the data support.

Leadership and management is an area where progress since the last visit is only just satisfactory. This is threatening the overall progress of the school. The task now is for the headteacher and senior staff to focus on the key priorities and to ensure that all appreciate the urgent need to accelerate the programme of improvement.

Progress since the last visit on the area for improvement:

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

External support

The school's advisor is well aware of the slowing of progress and that the school has not met all the success criteria in the time identified in the statement of action. The report from the evaluation officer correctly refers to the continuing need to embed and consolidate practice. The school has come close to meeting several criteria related to pupils' progress and attainment, teaching and the process of using data to set targets. This is largely due to the guidance and support of personnel from the local authority over the school year. Since January, the work of the numeracy consultant, for example, has been highly influential in developing the quality of teaching and raising teachers' confidence. The recent visit of the Early Years consultant confirmed the school's view of the strengthening picture for the youngest children. It also supported the teachers' realisation that the strong emphasis on early literacy had allowed progress in early numeracy to slip slightly.

The collaboration with a partner school has not followed the expected line. A change in status of the partner school to Local Leader of Education, as part of Greater Manchester Challenge, has necessitated changes in how it works with Beech Hill. However, the work of the partner school's headteacher with phase leaders on the analysis of data and subsequent report lifted the quality of their interpretation and pinpointed where further work needs to be done to ensure rigour in the use of data.

The participation of the school in Greater Manchester Challenge has come at an inopportune time. It is not clear how the school became involved and how the expectations and planned support link with the local authority's statement of action or the school's own plan to raise attainment.

Priorities for further improvement

- The clarification of the role and responsibilities of the deputy headteacher to maximise the use of her skills and expertise.
- The grading of lessons, the identification of specific points for improvement that will make a difference in the short term and quick return monitoring to ensure that the points are acted on successfully.
- The structured development of the creative curriculum to ensure that there is progression in the development of key skills in identified subjects.
- The rigorous analysis of data to 'get beneath the figures' – to identify possible trends, factors, links and implications for practice and provision.
- School governance.