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Mrs Willis
The Headteacher
Stoke Minster CE(A) Primary School
Boothem Old Road
Stoke-on-Trent
Staffordshire
ST4 4EE

Dear Mrs Willis

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Stoke Minster CE(A) Primary School

Following my visit with Peter Clifton, Additional Inspector, to your school on 24 and 25 March 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 January 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed in the Early Years Foundation Stage subject to the following qualifications that they receive mentor support which is regularly scrutinised by school leaders and governors.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children and Young People's Services for Stoke-on-Trent.

Yours sincerely

Davinder Dosanjh
Her Majesty's Inspector



Special measures: monitoring of Stoke Minster CE(A) Primary School

Report from the third monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 March 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the headteacher, staff, groups of pupils, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit the school appointed a teacher in the Early Years Foundation Stage who subsequently left the school within a term. The school temporarily has a seconded teacher in place to cover this vacancy.

Achievement and standards

Rates of progress are broadly satisfactory across the classes in Years 3 to 6. The best progress can be seen in writing because this has been the major area for improvement. While there is some closing of the gap between the standards now being reached and the levels pupils should be reaching from their starting points in Year 2, more remains to be done. Currently, pupils are on track to reach below average standards in English. In mathematics, progress is inadequate with few pupils on track to reach the higher Level 5. Current standards are low and leaders rightly recognise that this is an urgent priority for improvement. In science, the increased emphasis on developing pupils' investigative skills is beginning to improve standards. However, progress is hampered by gaps in pupils' learning and because their investigative skills are not built on systematically. Current standards are below average.

Children's current progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage remains good. Provision is well matched to their needs in the Nursery and Reception classes, as observed in the previous inspection and monitoring visit. The current Year 2 pupils entered Year 1 with knowledge and skills that were slightly below average overall. Current standards are below average with mathematics being the weakest area. These standards are not as good as those reached in 2008.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- target support in Years 3 to 6 to those who are most in need, especially the higher and lower ability pupils identified as underachieving – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

The behaviour of pupils continues to be good in lessons and around the school. Pupils adhere well to the playground rules. There have been no fixed term

exclusions since summer 2008. Good relationships exist between pupils and adults in the school and thus pupils feel safe. Attendance year on year fluctuates and remains below the average, there are encouraging figures for this academic year. The school has put in effective measures and strategies, with the support of the local authority, to encourage pupils who are persistently absent to attend regularly. The rewards for 100% attendance are motivating for the majority of pupils. Pupils enjoy lessons when they are actively taking part and working in groups. In the majority of the lessons observed there are effective opportunities for independent work. Older pupils take on a number of responsibilities and duties around the school, acting as prefects. The school values the pupils' views about how to improve aspects of their learning.

Quality of provision

Lessons were observed in all classes in Years 3 to 6 and in some classes in Years 1 and 2, and the Nursery and Reception Classes. The teaching observed was mostly satisfactory with a minority of lessons being good. No inadequate teaching was seen. This is a similar picture to that of the previous monitoring visit. The management of lessons and pupils is very effective and all lessons include a range of learning activities. While planning usually shows different tasks being provided for pupils of different abilities, in lessons, not enough is expected of the more able pupils. Time limits are given to pupils for the completion of work but frequently the expectation of how many questions or how much work needs to be undertaken is vague. Therefore, some pupils are slow to start and have no sense of urgency. While questioning is frequently met with an enthusiastic response, too little time is given for the pupils to respond in depth to explain their thinking. There are insufficient examples given to pupils at the start of tasks so they have a clear example of how to model their answers. However, in group work, teachers are now allocating their time more equitably among different groups in classes including those who are more able. Teaching assistants continue to make an effective contribution to learning, particularly those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In the Early Years Foundation Stage good use is made of the outside area and interactions between the adults and children are promoting good learning and development. The children play together happily and are well cared for.

The improvements in the science curriculum observed in the last visit have continued, with a marked increase in the quantity of investigative work being tackled. While pupils usually tackle this confidently, they are occasionally confused because of previous gaps in their learning. This is shown in their lack of curiosity, to work out or explain things for themselves. This also highlights a weakness in planning to build the pupils' skills progressively as pupils move through the school. However, they clearly enjoy the practical nature of the work. Worksheets are used prudently, for example to provide data for the pupils to interpret. Extra support provided to Year 6 pupils is enabling them to consolidate and apply basic skills.

The pupils' books show some good examples of extended writing in topic books and from the 'World Book Day' on the theme of aliens. There is a good range of different genres and includes the use of information and communication technology.

Improvement in guidance means that there is now a more consistent use of assessment to inform pupils about what they need to do. This is better in writing than in mathematics and science. In writing, pupils' personal targets are often used well to give pupils good insights about how to improve. Most pupils are using these confidently and say they are helping them to learn better.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- improve rates of progress in Years 3 to 6 by ensuring that work is matched fully to the needs of pupils – satisfactory
- devote enough time to science in Years 3 to 6 to ensure that the curriculum covers all that it should and progress is improved – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The leadership of the headteacher continues to be effective and provides clear direction for the school. She is well supported by subject leaders. They take a full and active part in monitoring standards. This is leading to improvements in teaching with some pupils now making much better progress. The leaders have a clear understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses. There remain some inconsistencies, in the application of the marking policy, the pace at which pupils learn, the challenge in lessons and the effectiveness of guided group work. The subject leaders in science, English and mathematics have conducted lesson observations and scrutiny of pupils' work. They have identified areas of improvement and organised appropriate training for staff as a consequence. Reports to governors from mathematics and literacy subject leaders provide an overview of the impact of actions and further work to be undertaken. The strategies to improve writing have made a difference and standards are improving. There are increased opportunities for extended writing and the quality of written work in books is much better. The intervention work currently being undertaken in mathematics has still to run its course. Due to the school's effective tracking and monitoring of pupils' progress, senior leaders were able to identify underachievement in mathematics and put in place appropriate interventions. All health and safety issues continue to be addressed and given high priority. Risk assessments and safeguarding checks meet current government requirements.

The chair of governors demonstrates strong leadership and has strengthened the governance of the school so that governors are more knowledgeable and better understand the work of the school. He has attended useful school and local authority training and engaged in learning walks in the school. The governors are beginning to challenge the school and ask searching questions about its performance. Link governors have met with subject leaders to discuss progress in their areas.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- carry out more rigorous monitoring of the school's work to identify the main priorities for improvement and ensure that all health and safety requirements are met – satisfactory.

External support

The school continues to benefit from the support provided by the local authority. This includes the effective support from consultants who have undertaken useful one to one work with teachers and helped to develop the role and confidence of teaching assistants in using intervention strategies in mathematics. The recent review carried out by the local authority rightly identifies the areas for further improvement. These include continually challenging the more able pupils and providing strategies for pupils to evaluate and improve their own work.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop a skills map for science which starts from Reception and goes up to Year 6.
- Improve standards and the progress being made by pupils in mathematics as a matter of urgency in Years 1 to 6.