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2 April 2009

Mrs L Lawrence
The Interim Headteacher
St Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Primary School
Dartmouth Avenue
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Dear Mrs Lawrence

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Primary School

Following my visit with William Goodall, Additional Inspector, to your school on 24 March 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fifth monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in June 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 – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

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, the Director of Walsall Children's Services and the Director of Education for the Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham.

Yours sincerely

Usha Devi
Her Majesty's Inspector

January 2009

Special measures: monitoring of St Thomas of Canterbury Catholic Primary School

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the interim headteacher, the Early Years Foundation Stage coordinator and numeracy coordinator, the chair and vice chair of governors, the school council, groups of pupils and a representative from Walsall Children's Services.

Context

The acting headteacher has been absent due to illness since January 2009. The current interim headteacher joined the school at the same time. The Year 1 class teacher left the school at the end of the autumn term and was replaced by a teacher on a temporary contract. The deputy headteacher who is also the special educational needs coordinator and Year 3 class teacher has been absent through illness since February 2009. The class teacher in Year 4 has had long periods of absence during the autumn and spring terms due to ill health. During this visit, temporary teachers were covering the classes in Years 3 and 4. The Early Years Foundation Stage coordinator has taken on responsibility for managing provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Achievement and standards

Work in pupils' books, the school's assessment information and lesson observations indicate that the majority of pupils in Years 1, 2, 5 and 6 are making at least satisfactory progress in mathematics, reading and writing. An increasing number of pupils are making good progress because of the school's focus on numeracy skills, a structured approach to teaching letters and sounds, and targeted support for reading. For example, in November 2008, 24% of pupils in Year 2 were working at the level expected for their age in reading. In February 2009, this increased to 43%. Similarly, in Year 1 the percentage of pupils working at the expected level increased from 35% to 52% in reading. Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage are making good progress, reflecting stronger teaching and better curriculum provision. In contrast, progress in Years 3 and 4 slows because of weaker provision and continued disruptions with staffing.

Standards are rising slowly from a very low base. Levels of attainment vary throughout the school due to the legacy of underachievement and the impact of continued staffing difficulties in some year groups. Pupils' work shows that standards range from below to well below average. Standards remain well below the national average in some year groups, for example in writing in Years 1 and 2 and mathematics in Year 3 and 4. Standards in writing remain a concern because of

weaknesses in grammar, including sentence structure and punctuation. Pupils do not have sufficient opportunities to develop and extend their writing skills.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in June 2007 –
■ increase the rate of pupil progress – satisfactory.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils are particularly positive about the changes that have been made to the learning environment. They describe their school 'as a brighter place'. They feel their work is more challenging and that most teachers are giving them more information on how to improve. Pupils have a good understanding of their targets and are increasingly involved in monitoring their own progress. Pupils' behaviour is satisfactory overall. It is good where expectations of behaviour are high and consistent with whole school practice.

Quality of provision

The majority of teaching in Key Stages 1 and 2 is satisfactory and some is good. (A review of pupils' work confirms that pupils in Years 1, 2, 5 and 6 make at least satisfactory progress in mathematics, reading and writing). In Years 3 and 4, the quality of teaching is satisfactory and quite fragile. This has led to variable rates of progress in these year groups.

Pupils make good progress when teachers use a range of techniques during lessons to assess pupils' learning and use this information to adapt activities to meet individual learning needs. They also achieve well when teachers set tasks which provide a suitable level of challenge for different ability groups in the class. In the most effective lessons, teachers use questions effectively to extend pupils' thinking and encourage pupils to talk about and review their work with a partner. Rates of progress slow when teachers spend too long on whole class introductions. This reduces the time pupils have to complete their activity. Similarly, when teachers do not provide pupils with the opportunity to engage in practical tasks which motivate and capture their imagination pupils do not always make the progress of which they are capable.

The quality of teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage is good. The staff work together successfully and ensure that children make good progress. Children engage in a wide range of stimulating activities, including those they can choose for themselves. Sometimes staff miss opportunities to extend pupils' writing skills.

Teachers' marking is improving and is most effective when it acknowledges the progress that has been made towards the lesson learning outcome and gives pupils the guidance they need to achieve their targets. However, this good practice is not consistent in all classes.

The use of interactive whiteboards and information and communication technology (ICT) has improved as a result of good training from Walsall Children's Service consultants and the school's ICT coordinator. Staff have responded with enthusiasm to this support and are now beginning to make better use of specific software in lessons. For example, pupils in Year 6 are now able to plan, write and illustrate stories using ICT. Teachers are continuing to make more effective links between subjects. For example, pupils in Year 2 learnt how to make biscuits in design and technology and recorded their recipes using the skills they learnt in literacy. In Year 5, pupils used their mathematical skills to produce graphs to monitor water usage as part of a geography project. Opportunities for pupils to write at length are underdeveloped.

Provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities has improved significantly. The school has identified the learning and emotional needs of individual pupils and established links with a range of external agencies. Pupils with specific learning needs are now receiving the support to which they are entitled.

As reported previously, safeguarding procedures are all in place.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in June 2007 –

- improve the quality of teaching and learning by using assessment information to plan lessons that provide sufficient challenge and meet the learning needs of all pupils – satisfactory
- further enrich the curriculum by using information and communication technology (ICT) and developing more effective links between subjects – satisfactory
- improve the care of pupils by ensuring that all statutory requirements are met, in particular regarding pupils' safety – good, the school meets all statutory requirements.

Leadership and management

The newly appointed interim headteacher has successfully built on the work of the previous acting headteacher. With strong support from Walsall Children's Services advisors and consultants, she has evaluated the impact of recent actions and accurately identified priorities for improvement. For example, she has revised the system for recording individual pupils' assessments and met with teachers and teaching assistants to discuss the progress made by individual pupils. This is helping staff to identify those who are underachieving and would benefit from additional support. The school is in the process of providing targeted support for these pupils. As a result of this visit, the interim headteacher is planning to track the progress of different groups of learners so that staff can better meet the needs of individual pupils.

During the absence of the deputy headteacher, the numeracy coordinator and the Early Years Foundation Stage coordinator have provided good support to the interim headteacher by willingly taking on additional responsibilities. They have worked well

with Walsall Children's Services advisors to improve provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and ICT. Senior teachers have worked alongside consultants to observe lessons and scrutinise pupils' work and teachers' planning. This has enabled them to gain a clear understanding of the school's growing strengths and priorities for improvement. Their work has yet to impact fully on rates of progress and the quality of teaching in all classes.

As reported previously, the school improvement plan has realistic and ambitious targets for the future. The actions identified in the plan are continuing to steadily drive forward improvements and are leading to faster rates of progress, particularly in reading and mathematics. The school is aware that the actions related to raising writing standards have not yet made a substantial impact. Senior teachers have recently evaluated performance in the subjects and key stages for which they hold responsibility. Although arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the school's work are undoubtedly improving, they are not rigorous enough. For example, evaluations by senior teachers do not focus sufficiently on the progress made by pupils. Feedback to staff following lesson observations and scrutinies of pupils' work do not always state when the areas of development, which have been identified, will be followed up. As a result, inconsistencies remain in the quality of teaching.

The chair of governors continues to provide the school with a good level of support. Governors are well informed about the work of the school and provide a suitable level of challenge and support during meetings. Governors are in the process of further strengthening their monitoring role within the school. The vice chair of governors is planning to establish links with classes so that governors can check for themselves the impact of interventions.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in June 2007 –

- improve the quality of leadership by more consistent, systematic and rigorous evaluation of the school's performance and by completing school plans that have realistic and ambitious targets for future development – satisfactory.

External support

Walsall Children's Services staff have continued to provide a good level of support. They have had a particularly positive impact in improving provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and ICT. The school's link advisor and other advisory staff have worked effectively with the newly appointed interim headteacher and senior teachers to monitor the work of the school. This has given senior staff a clear understanding of what more needs to be done to raise standards and accelerate progress. Through the Diocesan Schools Commission, the chair of governors has successfully ensured continuity of leadership during the absence of the acting headteacher. Although the long term absence of teaching staff has been temporarily resolved, this remains a concern. These absences are leading to slower rates of progress in some year groups. The school's link advisor and the chair of governors are in the process of liaising with a range of external agencies to resolve the staffing issues faced by the school.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards and accelerate the progress made by pupils, particularly in writing.
- With the support of Walsall Children's Services, tackle the issues of long term staff absence with a matter of urgency and ensure stability in the leadership and management of the school during the absence of the acting headteacher and deputy headteacher.

