

Prospects Learning Services Ltd
Prospects House
19 Elmfield Road
Bromley, Kent
BR1 1LT

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 020 8315 1250
Direct F 020 8315 1279
Viola.Hola@ofsted.gov.uk



23 April 2009

Mr Mike Edwards
Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
Pyle Hill
Newbury
RG14 7SJ

Dear Mr Edwards

Fresh start monitoring inspection of The Willows Primary School

Following my visit with David Shepherd, Additional Inspector, to your school on 24 and 25 March 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school opened in April 2007.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work; scrutinised documents; and met with the headteacher, deputy headteacher, a group of staff, a group of pupils, the chair of governors and two other governors, and a representative from the local authority who is also the School Improvement Partner. The lead inspector also observed a pupil-progress meeting, attended by three members of the school staff, two consultants from the local authority and a governor.

Context

The number of pupils has risen from 184 to 210. The increase includes 14 children who joined the Early Years Foundation Stage in January 2009 and admissions to other year groups. The school has been asked by the local authority to admit up to 60 pupils to the Early Years Foundation Stage in September 2009, 10 more than the planned number. Since January 2009, the Early Years Foundation Stage has comprised three classes; in Years 1 and 2 the three classes have been merged into two; and for Years 3 to 6 there is still one class per year group. Some classes are small.

Since the last monitoring visit in October 2008, one teacher has left. Two more teachers will be leaving at Easter. Two teachers continue on temporary contracts, one to cover a vacancy and the other maternity leave. The building project has been

completed, although some final adjustments are still being made. The library and computer room are now in use.

Achievement and standards

Work on speeding up pupils' progress has continued well in some parts of the school but not in others. The school's own data on pupils' attainment show considerable variation in the rates of progress between classes. In some classes, particularly in the upper part of the school, pupils are making much better progress than is typically seen nationally. Elsewhere, pupils' progress is too slow, and linked in the main to the quality of teaching and learning in those classes. In Years 1, 2 and 3 pupils' progress is patchy. In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children make satisfactory progress overall. They make good progress in developing their communication and language skills from levels that are generally well below those expected for their age when they enter the school. The previous monitoring visit showed that much remains to be done to raise standards and ensure that all pupils make at least satisfactory progress and this is still the case.

Nationally produced data, based on tests results in 2008, indicate that there are no major differences in the performance between groups. The current attainment and progress of the few pupils with English as an additional language, and for the larger group of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, will be examined at the next visit.

The outcomes of the 2008 Year 2 tests results improved from for writing and mathematics, but declined slightly for reading. However, overall results, and those for reading, were significantly below average. Results in writing and mathematics were closer to average. Current levels of attainment in Year 2 suggest outcomes are likely to be lower in the 2009 tests than in 2008.

The school's results in the 2008 national tests for Year 6 showed a particularly marked improvement from 2007 in English and also some improvement in mathematics and science. Results were below average in English and exceptionally low for mathematics and science. Pupils' progress from Years 3 to 6, as seen in the 2008 results, was better overall than in the previous year but is still in the bottom 20% compared to schools in similar circumstances. Progress improved greatly in English but declined in mathematics. The school is putting into place additional strategies to boost pupils' progress in the final weeks before the end-of-year tests take place in Year 6.

Following the observations made in the previous monitoring letter about pupils' writing, the headteacher states: 'We have taken on board the comments about the absence of 'best' and 'polished' work... children have the opportunity to produce accurate work to the very best of their ability, which is then shared and displayed with pride.' This is indeed the case in some classes. Some fine examples of writing were seen during the visit, for instance, the work of Year 5 pupils on the Second World War, which was on display in the school hall. Spelling is still a problem for

many pupils and errors too often go uncorrected. Pupils' reading is improving and, with the development of the library, the school is now in a better position to lift outcomes in reading which have suffered in the recent past for lack of suitable resources. Book stocks are being greatly improved. Teachers understand the importance of developing pupils' speaking and listening skills. One teacher said, 'If pupils can't say what they mean they can't write it either.' In the best lessons, these skills continue to improve because teachers encourage pupils to articulate their views to the whole class or in pairs and groups.

In science, another area where concerns were raised in previous visits, the school has made some progress in improving provision, with a visible impact on outcomes. There is still, however, much more to do raise standards in science. The new computer suite was not seen to be used during this visit and little evidence exists of pupils' work in information and communication technology (ICT). In general, pupils' work in subjects other than English and mathematics is still limited in quality and quantity because of the school's focus on literacy and numeracy. Some exercise books and displays show work in other subjects but they don't reveal any evidence of the full breadth and depth of what pupils should be covering, as outlined in the school's curriculum overview.

The school continues to keep good records of children's and pupils' attainment. Data are analysed well for Years 1 to 6, but less well for the Early Years Foundation Stage, to identify areas of success or weakness. The senior staff have a very clear view as to how much progress each class has made over the current academic year but not over a whole key stage.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in October 2008:

- improve progress in all year groups so that an increasing proportion of pupils reach the standards that are expected for their ages – inadequate progress

Personal development and well-being

The school continues its good work in lifting pupils' confidence and well-being. It has introduced additional programmes to improve the social skills and self-esteem of some pupils whose development in these areas is low. Behaviour in most classes and around the school is good. In the playgrounds and field and on the climbing apparatus, pupils are generally calm and happy. In view of the clear improvements in pupils' behaviour since the fresh start, the school is primarily rewarding work and effort because good behaviour is seen as the norm. Where the teaching lacks sufficient interest, some pupils quickly lose their concentration and begin to behave badly, disrupting the learning of others. Pupils' attitudes to school are positive in the main. All the school council members speak about how much they enjoy being in school.

Pupils feel safe in school. They say that bullying is not a problem and that when it occurs it is dealt with properly, although occasionally this is not the case. They feel that the building, with its recently enhanced security, offers them a safe and welcoming environment. Pupils are aware of how to keep healthy. They speak readily about the importance of a balanced diet and of taking exercise. The personal care and support given to pupils are good, with valuable contributions from teaching assistants as well as teachers. Pupils speak highly about the support they receive, which helps them to feel settled in school. Procedures for safeguarding children are fully in place.

Attendance is slightly lower than it was last year. It remains below the national average. The school adopts rigorous procedures to try to improve attendance, with some signs of success.

Quality of provision

The wide variability in the quality of lessons seen in previous visits remains. Of the 14 lessons seen during this monitoring visit, two were outstanding, two were good, six were satisfactory and four were unsatisfactory. Teaching and learning in Years 4 to 6 are generally stronger than in Years 1 to 3. In the Early Years Foundation Stage, they are satisfactory and sometimes good.

The best teaching includes excellent planning and resourcing of activities that excite pupils, in one case so much so that they forgot about their break-time. It also includes the use of high-quality questioning that provides challenge to pupils and extends their thinking and understanding. Moreover, topics are linked so that skills learned in one subject are applied in another, as seen in some science and design and technology lessons. In the better lessons, excellent relationships between staff and pupils encourage pupils to respond enthusiastically. Significant weaknesses still exist in teaching. These include low expectations of what pupils can achieve because the extent of their existing knowledge has not been thoroughly checked. In some classes, when the work is too easy or is poorly presented, pupils do their work carelessly or lose interest and begin to misbehave. Apart from the better lessons, teaching has still not exploited the potential of linking subjects across the curriculum to boost pupils' progress in the basic skills or to add interest. Where such links occur, for example during a themed day on the Second World War, pupils' enjoyment and learning in many subject areas were clear. The rehearsal for the school play 'Alice – The Musical' was a delight to see. In it, pupils performed with confidence and showed pride in their achievements.

Pupils' work in literacy and numeracy is, for the most part, marked with encouraging comments but elsewhere it is not generally marked well or at all. Marking does not refer to pupils' targets or to what they should do next to improve. Most pupils know the targets they are working towards in lessons. The 'must/should/could' approach provides them with a good guide during lessons. Pupils are less sure about their longer-term targets.

Provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage has some good features. All six areas of learning are taught indoors and outdoors. The accommodation, furniture and equipment are plentiful, in good condition, and appropriate for the children's ages.

Not enough has been done yet to ensure that, in all classes, mathematics skills are applied to real life and relevant contexts. Improvements in the provision of investigative work in science were noted at this visit. In other subjects besides English, mathematics and science, the school's overall curriculum plan is appropriate but it is not clear if this plan is being put into full effect. Some subjects, for example geography, history and religious education, are covered thinly. Some of the work done in art and design and technology is on display, but relatively little. The new computer suite is being used but, as yet, work in ICT has not had a significant impact on pupils' learning in other subjects. This may improve when the recently delivered 30 additional computers are located in classrooms. Staff and pupils appreciate the new display boards and exhibition areas, although they have yet to be used to the full. The new library is beginning to boost provision and outcomes for reading.

Provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is good. These pupils' needs are identified well. Programmes of work are planned to help them make the next steps in learning of which they are capable.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in October 2008:

- ensure that an increasing proportion of lessons provide good learning opportunities – inadequate progress
- develop marking, increase opportunities for reading, writing and using ICT and mathematics across the curriculum – inadequate progress

Leadership and management

There is no doubting the school's focus on teaching and learning but the drive to improve them is not sufficiently robust and inconsistencies remain. The headteacher wrote in January: 'We are now in a new era, with the management of behaviour a maintenance issue ... our first consideration is on learning.' The school is not yet in a secure position to face a full inspection in view of the unevenness of pupils' progress across the school and because of some shortcomings in teaching and the curriculum.

The tracking of pupils' progress in English, mathematics and science has good features, as seen in the school's data and in the pupil-progress review meetings. Careful consideration is given to individual pupils' needs and ways are sought to address them through specific interventions.

The school has set out clearly its expectations of subject leaders who have begun to work on their duties but, in the main, their work is at an early stage of development.

Subject leaders require further support and guidance on their roles and responsibilities so that they can quickly fulfil them. The leadership and management of provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are good. The headteacher is in the process of restructuring the senior leadership team for September 2009.

Planning for improvement is generally sound but the pace is slow in many places, especially in raising the overall quality of teaching and learning, implementing the school's overall curriculum plan including ICT, and developing subject leadership. The school's 'raising achievement plan' (RAP) is helpful in identifying the incremental steps needed to raise standards. Some targets are given in the plans but a few are not set out clearly enough yet.

Evaluations are accurate. The headteacher understands well the school's existing strengths and weaknesses. He has taken some action where necessary. Work on improving provision and outcomes in science, for example, is beginning to bear fruit. The work of improving the school's accommodation and resources has been successful, although this took longer than expected, and some 'snagging' is still going on. Classrooms and other areas are pleasant, bright and roomy.

Governors continue to be supportive and have strengthened the way in which they are holding the school to account for its outcomes. Governors and the school's business manager have played a vital part in improving accommodation. They, as well as the senior staff, are aware that the school's rate of improvement needs to be speeded up so that pupils' educational outcomes are lifted within acceptable timescales.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in June 2008:

- define more clearly the school's expectations of the work of subject and other key leaders in relation to improving the overall quality of provision and keeping pupils' progress under review – satisfactory progress

External support

The school is still being funded at a higher level than normal in the local authority for one more financial year. The local authority has worked with the school to improve accommodation, but some aspects of this were problematic and caused delays that have impeded progress for pupils' learning and for staff development.

The school welcomes and values much of the support provided by educational consultants from the local authority. For example, some older pupils are still struggling with reading, and the school, with good support from the local authority, is working with these pupils to develop their understanding of phonics and improve their reading skills. The School Improvement Partner and another school improvement adviser from the local authority work usefully with the school on

raising aspirations, and on keeping the school's work and progress under review. They should now act with greater urgency to enhance the rate of improvement.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is inadequate.

Priorities for further improvement

Of the four priorities given in the monitoring letter of October 2008, the first three remain priorities and the fourth has been amended to allow for and encourage further development.

- Improve progress in all year groups so that an increasing proportion of pupils reach the standards expected for their ages.
- Ensure that an increasing proportion of lessons provide good learning opportunities.
- Develop marking, increase opportunities for reading and writing, and using ICT and mathematics, across the curriculum.
- Having defined clearly the school's expectations of the work of subject and other key leaders in improving the overall quality of provision and keeping pupils' progress under review, support these post-holders in developing their skills and ensure that they fulfil the expectations placed on them within agreed timescales.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for West Berkshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
Her Majesty's Inspector