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Mrs S Cockroft  
The Headteacher  
Brenchley and Matfield Church of England Voluntary Aided Primary School  
Market Heath  
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Dear Mrs Cockroft

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 26 November 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please thank the staff, governors, group of pupils and the School Improvement Partner who spoke to me about the school's work.

Following the last inspection, the school has been through a period of instability in staffing. Soon after the inspection, two teachers resigned. The deputy headteacher was on long term illness for most of the last academic year and the Year 6 teacher was unwell for several months after the inspection. A fifth member of staff, the science coordinator, who is currently on long term absence, is expected to return to work before the end of this term on a phased entry. At the end of the current term, two teachers will be leaving for promotional and personal reasons. Two experienced teachers have been appointed and will take up their posts in January 2009. The new appointees have visited the school to ensure a smooth transition to their classes.

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As a result of the inspection on 7 and 8 June 2007, the school was asked to:

- improve the consistency of teaching and learning so that pupils make more even progress
- raise teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve and match pupils' tasks more closely to their earlier attainment and to establish a longer-term strategic plan so that leaders at all levels are clear about the next step for improvement.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making inadequate progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

The school has made limited progress towards pupils making better progress since the last inspection. At the time of the previous inspection, the new headteacher was faced with many challenges; there had been a succession of five headteachers over six years and procedures for monitoring the quality of provision were undeveloped. Additionally, there was not a systematic approach to holding staff to account for the rates of pupils' progress. Consequently, the headteacher immediately launched rigorous procedures for monitoring achievement and standards, but it has taken almost one academic year to change the culture and ethos of the school so that staff take full responsibility for pupils' achievement and have begun to tackle underachievement. The instability in staffing, the long term absence of the deputy headteacher, combined with insufficient support from the local authority and challenges to changing practice, all had a strong impact on the speed with which underachievement could be tackled rigorously.

The headteacher has now established a strong leadership team and leaders and managers are beginning to impact on raising standards and helping pupils to close gaps in their learning. The return of the deputy headteacher with specific expertise and the restructuring of the whole staff have all helped to strengthen the headteacher's position to begin increasing the pace of change for the better. The headteacher is very well supported by the governors who clearly understand that the school still has more to do to ensure that pupil progress is good or better.

The initial school improvement plan, written soon after the inspection, did not provide clear enough directions, measurable targets, and specific actions to raise standards further. Since the start of September 2008, a single new development plan has been introduced. This covers important areas such as achievement, teaching and learning and leadership and management, as well as the actions and criteria for evaluating the impact of the planned changes. Although it is too early to measure the full impact of the changes introduced at the start of the current term, evidence is beginning to emerge that robust monitoring procedures and the training of middle managers to improve capacity are working. Senior staff now show a clear understanding of the headteacher's vision to raise standards and acknowledge that they 'have turned the corner'.

The 2008 unvalidated national tests results taken at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 were lower than in 2007. The decline in achievement and standards was most pronounced in writing at Key Stage 1, in the proportion of more able pupils reaching the higher levels and among pupils of Gypsy and Roma descent. The school did not meet its targets in any of the subjects and results fell short of the local authority's average and the teachers' assessment. Given pupils' starting point, their rates of progress are slower than expected with too many not reaching their full potential at the end of each key stage.

The deputy headteacher and subject leaders for literacy and mathematics have completed a very careful analysis of pupils' performance. This identified specific weaknesses in literacy and number work and swift actions have been taken to begin tackling these. Class teachers and subject leaders are now more involved in monitoring pupils' progress and are developing a more accurate picture of pupils' progress this term. Steps have also been taken to identify the most vulnerable pupils and provide additional support for them in small groups.

A considerable amount of time has been given to moderating pupils' work and lesson observations have been carried out to improve the quality of teaching and learning. These involve detailed feedback that identifies areas for improvement. Additionally, developmental work involving written guidelines on good teaching, support, and opportunities to team teach and observe advance skilled teachers internally and externally have taken place. However, the teaching seen during this monitoring visit did not reflect the high level of developmental work and systems in place to improve teaching and learning. Pupils said, that they would like, 'More work that is challenging, fun, active and interesting.' Although inadequate teaching has largely been eliminated, the school's drive to improve teaching is not yet having a strong enough impact to ensure that it is at least satisfactory or good for pupils to make better progress. For example, marking is not yet consistent, the quality and quantity of work in pupils' books is too variable and work is not always well matched to pupils' ability.

The arrival of the new School Improvement Partner (SIP) has brought about much needed support for the school in relation to advice, training and monitoring. Prior to the arrival of the School Improvement Partner, there was insufficient expert guidance and financial support from the local authority. In the light of falling rolls, the local authority has yet to indicate how it will be providing the further support needed to ensure that the recent changes can be sustained and that those outlined in the single plan can be implemented.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

Carmen Rodney  
Her Majesty's Inspector