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Ms G Harwood-Smith, Ms T George and Mrs P Turner
Consultant and Acting Headteachers
Gifford Primary School
Greenhill Gardens
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Middlesex
UB5 6BU

Dear Ms Harwood-Smith, Ms George and Mrs Turner

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 19 May 2009, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I would be grateful if you could pass on my thanks to everyone who met me to discuss the school's progress, to the pupils who gave up some of their lunchtime and to the staff whose classrooms I visited. My colleague, Karen Taylor, would also like to thank everyone for the warm welcome she received and the opportunity you gave her to gain an insight into the practice of school improvement.

The headteacher who was in post at the time of the last inspection resigned two months later. After a short period of interim headship, in January this year a consultant headteacher began working intensively with the school and the two deputy headteachers were appointed as acting headteachers. The chair of governors and several other governors resigned. Experienced governors have taken their place. They have successfully recruited a headteacher, who will take up post in September. The school continues to experience a very high degree of turbulence in the pupil population – about one third of the current Year 6, some 30 pupils, did not start their primary school career at Gifford.

As a result of the inspection on 24 and 25 September last year, the school was asked to tackle two important issues: to ensure that all pupils make better progress by making sure that activities match their individual needs, and to improve the quality of teaching and learning by using assessment information more effectively to set challenging targets.

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

Initially, the school's progress in moving forward was at best satisfactory. At this visit, however, everyone who discussed their work and its impact with me mentioned the significant shift in the pace of progress that has occurred since January. 'We really began motoring,' said one of the phase leaders. The impact has not been slow to show; far more pupils are making the progress that they should, and many are making up ground that they lost in previous years. The school's results had shown little sign of improvement over recent years and the value that was added between Key Stages 1 and 2 was slight. Now the school confidently predicts higher results than last year at Key Stage 2, even though these pupils' starting points in Year 3 were much lower compared to the previous year group. Importantly, more pupils are predicted to reach the higher Level 5. Targets are already being met and so are being revised upwards to be more challenging.

The key to this acceleration in progress has been the impressive work that the consultant headteacher has done, in conjunction with the two acting headteachers, in determining the best way forward. She has really helped all within the school to see the 'wood for the trees'. There is a clear and unequivocal focus on the few, key, things that will make a difference. The first priority was to raise teachers' expectations and establish a culture in which it is normal, and not exceptional, for pupils to reach the levels expected for their age. Second, she gave the acting headteachers, and in turn the middle leaders the tools, to do their job, empowering them to take the lead and with it responsibility for the pupils' learning. The wider leadership group is now a powerful force for change.

The school has developed a straightforward system for tracking pupils' progress. Information about different individuals, groups and cohorts of pupils is at everyone's fingertips. Teachers regularly discuss the progress of pupils in their class with senior and middle leaders and work out how those pupils whose progress is not as fast as it might be are to be supported. A range of intervention strategies is used to help pupils close the gap and reach the levels that they should. This includes helping teachers develop their practice. Teachers' marking of work has improved and pupils get regular feedback on how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve. However, it is not clear that the pupils are given time to respond to the teachers' suggestions.

The fact that the school's initiatives are seen to be working has bolstered teachers' confidence and raised their morale. Positive attitudes and a determination to do the best for the pupils came through every discussion with members of staff. Staff said that they were relieved to be working on fewer priorities than in the past. They felt they were working just as hard, but now knew exactly what they were aiming for and were confident that initiatives would be seen through to the end.

From the Early Years Foundation Stage upwards, pupils have targets to aim for in their reading, writing and mathematics. They know them, and know what they have to do to get to the next level. The pupils themselves thought that targets were a good thing because they motivated them; they were keen to be seen to be moving on. They also thought that the teachers give them harder work in lessons and said

that they enjoy the challenge, because it helps them to learn more. They were also confident that they would be helped if they got stuck. It is clear that the pupils are also rising to the challenge of the faster pace of improvement. Their behaviour and attitudes in lessons were excellent; pupils were interested and engaged in what they were doing, and spoke confidently about their work.

The school has benefited from the effective support of consultants and advisers from the local authority. The support has been well organised and carefully focused, in line with the school's priorities and the local authority's plan. The school's progress is regularly and honestly evaluated, and amendments have been made to plans where necessary. There is an atmosphere of mutual support and trust with the local authority, which is contributing to the school's good progress.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill
Her Majesty's Inspector