

PROTECT - INSPECTION

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Mrs Patricia Telfer
Headteacher
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Hencotes
Hexham
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Dear Mrs Telfer

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school, for the time you gave to our telephone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please thank the staff and the representatives of the governing body and local authority who spoke to me and thank particularly the pupils who gave up some of their lunchtime to meet me.

As a result of the inspection in September 2007, the school was asked to:

- Improve teaching and learning by better marking of children's work, the use of a wider range of teaching strategies in lessons, giving children harder work wherever this is appropriate, and providing more opportunities for the children to learn independently.
- Improve leadership and management through more rigorous monitoring of teaching and learning, with self-evaluation more clearly linked to how well children are achieving.
- Improve the partnership with parents through better consultation, improved communication and through greater involvement of parents in the life of the school.

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

The school has been through a turbulent period. Two of the six teachers are on temporary or supply contracts and the leadership team is depleted. The substantive deputy headteacher retired in July 2007 and despite its best efforts the school has been unable to appoint a replacement. The governing body attempted to cover this vacancy by seconding an experienced senior teacher into the position of deputy headteacher but its efforts were not successful. In order to cover the vacancy and ensure that there is always someone to deputise for the headteacher, two experienced teachers have taken on additional responsibilities. However, these two teachers have very heavy workloads. They are responsible for most core subjects, some foundation subjects and other important aspects of the school's work. Only one of the teachers receives regular non-contact time during the school day to carry out management responsibilities or to promote improvement in her subjects. Both teachers are given some time to undertake specific tasks. Governors have reviewed the staffing structure and the school will advertise for a third senior teacher later this term. If successful, this will stabilise staffing and allow responsibilities to be shared more equitably.

The school collects a great deal of information about the outcomes of its work but this is not evaluated rigorously enough. The local authority (LA) arranged and funded training which helped the school to improve its self-evaluation form (SEF). The school's SEF is now a useful document which provides 'signposts' to other school documents and evidence. However, because self-evaluation is not robust the school's judgements about its effectiveness are too generous. There are formal lesson observations and less formal 'drop in' sessions or 'learning walks'. These activities are helping the school to develop more consistent practice. However, lesson observations do not focus on the progress made by pupils so they often fail to identify the most important things which should be improved. As a result, teachers are not given accurate feedback which would help them to improve further.

When pupils start school most can do as much as others of their age and some can do more. They get off to a good start in the Reception class because teaching is exciting and the teacher expects them to do a great deal for themselves. Very effective questioning ensures that all children participate in activities and they are given short, well targeted tasks which meet their current needs. They receive very good support from the teacher and from other adults in the classroom so their confidence and skills develop well. Pupils make satisfactory progress in Years 1 to 4. Teachers plan lessons carefully and they use a range of strategies to help pupils understand new concepts. Although this is a positive step forward these activities are not always as useful as they could be because teachers do not make the most of the opportunities they provide. The pace of teaching is slow and teachers talk for too much of the time. Many teachers provide different work for pupils of different abilities. However, these tasks do not always meet their most pressing needs. Pupils are not challenged enough because teachers do too much for them and rely too heavily on worksheets or textbooks particularly in mathematics and English. This is limiting pupils' achievement because it does not allow them to organise or present work in a variety of ways and they cannot go beyond the questions which are asked of them.

Although the school has effective procedures to assess and track pupils' progress over the longer term it pays too little attention to day-to-day progress in lessons. The school expects teachers to mark pupils' work carefully, telling them what they have done well and how to improve. Evidence from the visit suggests that this guidance has not been implemented. All work was marked but most marking was a tick or a positive comment. In one or two classes there were occasional and very recent examples of more helpful marking but this was not evident across the school. Teachers gain little useful information from assessing completed worksheets because the limited range of possible outcomes make it difficult to tell how well or otherwise pupils have understood their work. While teachers are obviously pleased with pupils' efforts, there is no evidence to suggest that they use information from marking to plan work which will challenge pupils further, especially in mathematics.

The school's progress in improving communications with parents has been stronger. In addition to the usual range of information provided for families the staff have also worked with focus groups in order to discuss and resolve issues of interest to the school and the local community. The school ensured that all interested parties were able to attend meetings by consulting parents about preferred times and dates and offering a range of alternatives. As a result of these meetings parents are now clear about the roles and responsibilities of the headteacher, governors, the diocese and the LA and the school has established consistent guidelines which inform decision making. The headteacher is very positive about the impact of this work. She feels that communication with parents is now more open and timely and that the school can resolve any potential difficulties at an early stage. This view is confirmed by the prompt and effective way in which the school has dealt with staffing difficulties. Although one class has had four teachers during the current academic year parents appear satisfied that the school is doing all it can to resolve the situation. The focus groups have now served their original purpose but the school is so positive about the usefulness of this type of consultation that parents, governors and staff have worked together to formulate 'Ambitions' for the next stage of the school's development.

The school is aware that not all parents have been involved in these groups so it makes good use of less formal meetings. An electronic survey of parents' views was carried out at a parents' meeting and there is daily communication between home and school. Parents are welcomed into the school in the morning and this provides a very pleasant start to the day. Parents can talk to the headteacher or staff and see their children's work. A number of parents help out in school, organising resources or information. The number of pupils on roll declined during the 2006/07 academic year but this situation has now stabilised and there is a steady trickle of new entrants. The school reports that more pupils will join the school in September than have done so in previous years. While this has much to do with a rising birth-rate, it also demonstrates that parents are happy with all that the school provides.

The school has benefited from extra support provided by the LA. This additional support made a very positive contribution to the success of the focus groups and to improving communication with parents. The school has worked in partnership with a

leading edge school and the headteacher reports that they found this very helpful. There has been a good range of support from consultants and regular visits from the school improvement partner.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
Her Majesty's Inspector