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25 March 2009

Mrs Margaret Windsor
Acting Headteacher
Townsend Primary School
Townsend Street
London
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Dear Mrs Windsor

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Townsend Primary School

Following my visit with Judith Howell, Additional Inspector, to your school on 17 and 18 March 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in October 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory. There is good progress in some key respects.

Newly qualified teachers may 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 and the Director of Children's Services for Southwark.

Yours sincerely

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Townsend Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 17 and 18 March 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including several lessons and three assemblies, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, groups of pupils, staff, governors, an officer from the local authority (LA) and a representative of City Challenge.

Context

Soon after the inspection, the headteacher went on long-term sickness absence and remains absent. Her deputy head took over initially and, since February, the LA has provided one of its staff as acting headteacher. The chair of governors has also changed since the inspection. However, in general, staffing has remained stable.

Achievement and standards

The unvalidated data from teachers' assessments and national tests completed in the summer term of 2008 show that standards in Key Stages 1 and 2 were significantly below the national average.

The school's assessments demonstrate that, although Year 6 pupils' progress is improving, the long-standing underachievement in that year group remains. However, while pupils' progress remains inconsistent as they move through the school, the acting headteacher and staff have determinedly set out to raise achievement. Improvements in assessment procedures and teaching mean that the school can demonstrate that pupils are beginning to make better progress from their starting points and that specific interventions are increasingly effective. The school has recently made a careful analysis of writing across the school, which shows that pupils are underachieving but gives a clear baseline and context for improvement. One key area for improvement is that pupils are not clear enough about how to write for specific purposes. School tracking, supported by inspection evidence, indicates that Year 2 pupils are making better progress, so it is probable that standards at the end of Key Stage 1 will improve this year.

Progress since the last inspection on the area for improvement:

- raise standards in English, mathematics and science, particularly in Key Stage 2 and make sure that pupils of all abilities reach their potential – satisfactory, although residual underachievement remains

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being have improved since the inspection. They have noticed the school becoming better and have responded positively to it.

In general, they behave well in assemblies and lessons, where they are responsive and ready to learn, and around the school. They are very friendly and helpful. They really like the range of activities and equipment available to them at play-times, which are well supported by staff. Their harmonious, safe, active and happy play together, and the care they show to others in fairly small but well-organised spaces, is just lovely to observe. In discussion, however, pupils say that there is sometimes rough and unkind behaviour in school but that this is well handled by staff. They say that the peer mentoring scheme, which also aims to deal with this, needs more development. There have been no recent exclusions. Pupils are very clear that they enjoy school, although attendance is below average. They have noticed, and like, recent additions to the curriculum, with more time given to foundation subjects such as art, but would still like more varied and fun lessons.

Quality of provision

The school has recently introduced a range of strategies to improve the quality of teaching and these have had a very positive impact. For example, discussions between children as peer partners, and more frequent and improved use of questioning by teachers, have made lessons more interactive and effective.

To their credit, teachers have taken on board these strategies very quickly and are determined to improve achievement. The school knows that there is now a need to consolidate and build upon the new strategies and for staff to be increasingly more discerning when using them. For example, in lessons observed, sometimes the references by staff to pupil targets and learning objectives, while helpful, were made so often that they interrupted the flow of the lessons. Nevertheless, most of the time, the pace of learning is suitably brisk and work is increasingly well matched to need. Teachers provide clear learning objectives and the improving use of success criteria is supporting pupils' understanding of what they are working towards. Pupils settle to their work quickly and usually stay well focused. Systems to assess pupils' work and monitor their progress in English and mathematics are now better used to inform subsequent planning. Individual pupils know their personal targets well and are clearer about how they can achieve them. Pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities now make better progress as a consequence of the improved targeted support. Teaching assistants are deployed effectively when pupils are working individually or in groups.

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, changes to staff and the appointment of a new leader mean that some systems, such as planning and assessment, are being re-established.

Recently, the acting headteacher has rightly adjusted timetables to ensure that foundation subjects are given appropriate time. However, the long-term planning for these subjects is generally rather shallow, which reduces the quality of learning and challenge within lessons. Pupils willingly do much writing in foundation subject lessons but not always for clear enough purposes, helping them apply their writing skills in a range of contexts. Singing is also underdeveloped in the school.

Progress since the last inspection on the area for improvement:

- improve teaching, particularly at Key Stage 2, ensuring that all teachers know how to use assessment information to plan learning and guide pupils to their next steps to be achieved – good

Leadership and management

When the substantive headteacher became absent, the deputy headteacher carried out her interim acting headship role well, with LA support. She ensured the stability of the school and supported pupils and staff very effectively at a difficult time. The current acting headteacher, working closely and very effectively with the deputy, has taken this success still further. In a very short time, she has tapped into the enthusiasm and very strong commitment of the staff, through training, well-placed encouragement, rigorous checking and analysis of strengths and weaknesses, sensible adaptations of systems (including the school's class structure) and practical support. As a result, teaching has improved quickly. The clear potential within the staff has begun to be released, and there is a strong sense of togetherness and real care for each pupil throughout the school. These developments are encompassed in an effective new action plan.

This improved whole-school direction has also brought a new lease of life to the dedicated members of the senior leadership team. This team meets regularly, analysing and making strategic decisions in a positive but accountable atmosphere. Senior staff are receiving good opportunities for professional development. In turn, they support and guide staff in their teams effectively to make the positive changes taking place across the school. This represents a very notable improvement in leadership and management. However, at this early stage, there is insufficient oversight of curriculum development and curriculum leadership remains weak outside the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Nevertheless, with its strengthened leadership and staff commitment, the school is ready to begin to improve its curriculum.

The governing body, under its active new chair, has improved since the inspection. It is now more knowledgeable about, and focused on, the improvements needed in the school and the governing body's role as critical friend. A governors' monitoring group meets regularly to review progress and is rightly considering whether these meetings may need to be more frequent. Governors are also well aware of their responsibility to ensure continuity in the leadership of the school and in its capacity to continue improving.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- develop the skills of the leadership team to monitor the work of the school with rigour, aiming for consistency of practice and utilising the good practice already in place – good

- strengthen governance, particularly in monitoring the school's work more systematically so that governors can hold the school to account – satisfactory

External support

The LA provides good support. It has made prudent decisions, with the governing body, about the school's temporary leadership, aiming to build the school's own capacity. It has provided, for the time being, its own staff to work in the school as acting head, on the senior leadership team and as governors. It recognises clearly how important it is that the school has suitable leadership to take it forward in the longer term and is working hard towards this. Its statement of action is followed well and makes a positive impact, with many LA staff, such as consultants, supporting improvement helpfully. The lead officer provides good consultancy and advice and the School Improvement Partner's evaluations are accurate. City Challenge also supports the school usefully, including funding an additional teacher to help reduce the current underachievement in Year 6.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve over time the breadth and depth of the whole-school curriculum, so that it is more exciting and challenging, with clear progression in skills and knowledge, and contributes more to raising standards. (This will become a further key area for improvement, and will be evaluated from the next monitoring inspection in the provision section.)
- Ensure that the school has suitable arrangements for its longer-term leadership as soon as possible.