

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
Wiola.Hola@ofsted.gov.uk



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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

Introduction

Following my visit with Stephanie Matthews, Additional Inspector, to your school on 8 and 9 July 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the fourth 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, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority who is also the School Improvement Partner. Inspectors spoke with pupils during lessons and break-times.

Context

The number of pupils has risen to 229, 33 more than at the time of opening. There are currently eight classes: Nursery, Reception and one for each of Years 1 to 6. In September, there will be three classes in the Early Years Foundation Stage and also three for pupils in Years 1 and 2 mixed, that is, 10 classes in all, including the four classes for Years 3 to 6. Since the last monitoring visit in March 2009, two teachers have left. One was the coordinator for Years 1 and 2, and the other the coordinator for special educational needs and also for the Early Years Foundation Stage. In addition, a teacher on a temporary contract has been replaced by a permanent teacher who has returned from maternity leave. Another teacher continues on a temporary contract until the end of Term 6.

Achievement and standards

There is now a much greater sense of urgency with regard to improving pupils' progress. Progress in lessons has improved across the school, in line with improvements to teaching and learning, although there is still variation in the rates of progress over an academic year between classes. Pupils in Years 4 and 5 have made particularly good progress this year. Elsewhere, pupils' progress is still patchy but shows some signs of improvement.

Educational outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage are much the same as at the previous visit. Children in the Nursery and Reception classes generally make satisfactory progress because of the suitably broad range of experiences provided for them but this visit has raised some concerns about aspects of provision. Children determine their own activities. Older ones can sustain their attention well when using computers and when engaged in writing activities, for example. They are gaining in independence and are able to serve themselves sensibly in the snack bar. As noted before, communication skills develop well, in the main, because staff encourage children to talk about what they are doing.

Results of the 2009 national tests in Year 2 are considerably lower than in 2008 and bear out the concerns that have been raised, both in previous monitoring visits and by the school, about the quality of past provision at this stage. Results are likely to be well below the national average. The pupils currently in Year 2 have not made adequate progress over Years 1 and 2 and much will have to be done to accelerate their learning in Year 3 and beyond. Provisional results in the 2009 end of Year 6 tests, based on the percentage of pupils reaching or exceeding the expected level, show a small improvement in mathematics and science but a slight fall in English. The percentage of children attaining Level 4 in both English and mathematics was 46% in 2009, down from 48% in 2008, but the 2009 cohort of pupils was slightly weaker overall than in 2008. The intervention strategies deployed in Year 6 have helped pupils to improve. The school is disappointed with these results but they are not entirely unexpected, given the shortcomings in the pupils' previous education.

Overall, the school has made satisfactory progress in raising achievement and standards in science and information and communication technology (ICT). Pupils can explain to inspectors what work they have been doing in science, and talk about investigations undertaken. Progress is aided through some of the themed work done across the curriculum, for example, looking at life cycles and how to live healthy lives, and studying different types of forces. Some lovely displays in classrooms show the breadth of work done in science. The new computer suite, not seen in use during the previous visit, is now being used well, but pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding of ICT are considerably lower than in most other schools because of the limited ICT provision in the past.

Some progress has also been made in raising pupils' literacy skills. There are more examples now than before of pupils' best and polished work but such improvement is sporadic and not yet uniform across the school. Spelling continues to be a problem

for many pupils but staff are making a concerted effort to improve it systematically. Pupils' reading skills were not evaluated during this visit. The school reports that the library is now in regular use and the book stock is being improved. Pupils speak of taking books home regularly and were seen enjoying this facility. Further work has been done to boost pupils' skills and confidence in speaking, and to lift standards in writing through the development of speaking. There is still more to do to ensure that pupils' skills in subjects beyond English, mathematics, science and ICT develop in a planned and progressive way.

The school continues to improve its assessment record for Years 1 to 6. Although there are some good aspects to record keeping in the Early Years Foundation Stage, there are discontinuities in the systems between the Nursery and Reception classes that are not helpful to staff or parents. Some further refinements are possible in relation to speeding up the analysis of sub-groups of pupils, such as those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. At this visit, the progress of pupils with English as an additional language, and the nature of any specific interventions provided for them, were found to vary enormously between classes. More needs to be done to help these pupils to access the curriculum and to make better progress.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in March 2009:

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

Personal development and well-being

As at the time of the last visit, the school continues its good work in lifting pupils' confidence and well-being. Provision for developing pupils' personal, social and health education has been enhanced; pupils have a good understanding of how to lead healthy lives. The support for the significant number of vulnerable pupils in the school has some good features. Behaviour is still mostly good and, in some classes, it is exemplary. Where teaching does not hold pupils' full attention, pupils become distracted, to the point where some disturb the lesson. Teaching assistants, as well as teachers, play a clear and vital role in helping some vulnerable pupils to maintain their concentration or to recover from emotional upsets. Overall, the school is a calm, harmonious place in which most pupils behave sensibly and kindly towards each other, a considerable improvement since the school was given a Fresh Start. However, a few pupils were seen acting unwisely in the playground near fences and the pond. Staff dealt appropriately with these potentially dangerous misdemeanours.

Attendance is improving but it is still below the national average. The school is working hard with parents and with pupils to lift it. The highly visible attendance chart in the school hall signals the school's emphasis on promoting good attendance.

Quality of provision

The overall quality of teaching and learning has improved since the last visit; all teaching was judged to be satisfactory. Some lessons are of high quality and others are good but most are still satisfactory. Some particularly effective teaching was observed in Years 4 and 5. Teachers have secure subject knowledge. Lesson planning is mostly good but, other than in the best lessons, activities are still not always matched as closely as they might be to pupils' needs.

ICT is being used more effectively and teachers generally make good use of the interactive whiteboards. Children and pupils at all stages are showing improved skills as independent learners; they are often encouraged to work in pairs and groups and most do this well. Pupils are generally very attentive, want to please and succeed. Questioning can be used well but is sometimes too general and not used adequately to test the understanding of individual pupils. In some lessons, the pace is still slow or teachers talk for too long. Teachers work in good partnership with the many able and effective teaching assistants. Some classrooms have excellent displays which celebrate pupils' work. Work in some subjects is marked regularly and this sometimes provides helpful strategies for improvement. However, pupils are not given enough opportunities to evaluate their own and others' work.

The quality of the curriculum is improving in various ways. There is now a greater emphasis on developing skills in literacy and numeracy across the curriculum because links between subjects are being usefully forged. Science and ICT have greater prominence than before. The particular needs of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities are met with increasing effectiveness and the school is increasing opportunities for pupils who have identified gifts and talents. Some valuable links exist with local schools, for example in relation to physical education. A growing range of clubs and enrichment activities is available for pupils. The previous visit found that some subjects were being covered thinly in Years 1 to 6 and this is still the case, for example in music. The school has a reasonable curriculum overview but has yet to establish clearly and fully exactly what knowledge, skills and understanding it expects to develop in pupils year by year, subject by subject. There is an urgent need to address this matter in relation to the new organisation of the mixed Year 1 and 2 classes.

Children in the Early Years Foundation Stage benefit from a good range of resources, including computers and role-play areas. Outdoor areas are spacious and well equipped and there are covered areas and safe surfaces near climbing equipment. Free flow between indoor and outdoor activities is fully established. Whole-group activities are well focused and address children's learning needs appropriately. However, there are some concerns relating to health and safety. The layout of both indoor and outdoor spaces means that children need to be monitored carefully by strategically placed adults, but this is not always happening.

Overall, pastoral care has some strengths. Staff are caring and patient and know pupils well. The vetting of staff is undertaken to meet statutory requirements but

some other aspects of safeguarding are not fully in place. Concerns have been raised with the school with regard to the supervision of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and of pupils at break-times; staff are not always in a position to see what activities pupils are engaged in. A particular issue relates to the snack bar for children in the nursery and reception classes; children were observed eating food and opening a large refrigerator with equipment stored on top when no adult was present. Toilet provision is inadequate. Hygiene issues occur because some children are reluctant or forget to wash their hands. The school does not have a record of racist incidents. The headteacher needs to address these matters urgently.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the monitoring inspection in March 2009:

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

Leadership and management

A mixed picture pertains here. Leadership and management have been strengthened in some respects: through improved systems of monitoring and accountability; stronger governance that holds senior staff to account more systematically for the quality of provision and outcomes; some positive developments in subject leadership. Plans for improvement focus on the right areas. Nevertheless, the school's capacity to improve quickly has been dented with the departure of some key post-holders. The gaps in management are being filled by the headteacher and deputy but this is putting a strain on them. The balance they are able to achieve between day-to-day management and strategic leadership is not right at the moment. Staff and governors are aware that a good pace of improvement needs to be achieved. The school is still fragile in that, while some good and even excellent practice exists, it is not spread uniformly across the school.

The absence of a leader for the Early Years Foundation Stage is apparent, for example, in some shortcomings in communication between staff in this stage so that their tasks and activities are not always coordinated well enough, in the supervision of children, and in the gathering of assessment information. Leadership at this stage is improving because the headteacher has taken advice on the way provision should develop. Improvements in both staffing and accommodation are planned for September at the same time as an increase in the number of children is expected.

Subject leadership has improved and there are some good elements in the way the leaders examine educational provision. Subject leaders' commentaries are not yet sufficiently well focused on how well pupils are achieving in each subject.

The safeguarding concerns raised in this letter will form a major focus of the next monitoring inspection.

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 local authority is clear that this school is still in need of considerable support because the agenda for improvement is demanding. It is acting with increased urgency. It has allocated to the school additional time from consultants and from the School Improvement Partner. This support is much valued and beneficial. The local authority is working with governors over the impending building project so that the headteacher can give his attention to raising standards and achievement. The school would benefit from further advice about safeguarding and community cohesion.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is satisfactory, although it is still not yet in a position to face a full inspection.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that all elements of safeguarding are fully in place.
- Improve progress in all year groups by further enhancing the provision of effective teaching and the school's focus on learning outcomes.

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