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6 October 2009

Mrs Gill Broom
Headteacher
Mount Pleasant Primary School
Newton Lane
Darlington
County Durham
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Dear Mrs Broom

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Mount Pleasant Primary School

Following my visit with Maggi Shepherd, Additional Inspector, to your school on 29-30 September 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2009. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – *inadequate*.

Newly Qualified Teachers may not 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 Darlington LA.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Ripley
Her Majesty's Inspector



Special measures: monitoring of Mount Pleasant Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 29-30 September 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, including nine part lessons (of which seven were in Key Stage 2 and two were in Key Stage 1) and pupils at play during breaks and lunchtimes, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, staff, four groups of pupils, the chair of governors and a newly appointed governor and representatives from the local authority (LA) including the Director and Assistant Director of Children's Service. The Early Years Foundation Stage was not a focus of activity during this visit because its provision was judged good at the last inspection.

Context

Since the last inspection an assistant headteacher, an additional class teacher for Key Stage 2 and a higher level teaching assistant have been appointed to the permanent staff, taking up their posts at the start of the autumn term 2009. The governing body committee structure has been revised and two additional governors with considerable experience of governance in other schools have joined the governing body.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

There is no evidence of improved achievement since the last inspection. The results of the Year 6 national tests in 2009 show that standards at the end of Key Stage 2 remain too low, both at the expected Level 4 and at the higher Level 5. Whilst the standards achieved in reading and mathematics improved somewhat when compared to the previous year, standards in writing dropped to an all time low of 29%, continuing a five year trend of decline. During this visit inspectors found that whilst pupils could readily provide satisfactory and often good verbal answers and explanations, too many lacked the confidence to write these down. This remains a significant barrier to their learning and achievement in all subjects. Although boys' standards are significantly lower than girls in reading and mathematics their standards are higher in writing. The reasons for this have not as yet been identified.

Pupils' progress throughout Key Stage 2 remains too slow and varies too much between different classes. Pupils' enjoyment of lessons and their attitudes to learning also continues to vary between classes. Most pupils behave well in lessons and in some cases, they are enthusiastic and try their best to answer questions and complete tasks. Too often, however, pupils are passive learners who are not active participants in their learning. This is because too much of the work they are given is not interesting enough and is still not matched closely enough to their needs. Expectations of pupils' capabilities generally remain too low.



The school is still failing to meet the needs of its more able pupils. It continues to be the case that planning does not address these well enough and insufficient account is taken of prior learning whilst in whole-class discussions there are not enough challenging questions to extend their thinking. In many cases, the work set remains far too easy for the pupils and they finish it quickly, having neither consolidated earlier learning nor tackled new learning. Some tasks are too limiting and do not offer these pupils the opportunity to extend their ways of thinking or take the initiative because the teacher only requires one solution. In some lessons, the more able pupils disengage from the learning because they feel it is far too easy.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and improve progress in Key Stage 2 – inadequate.
- Set work that is more challenging for the most able pupils – inadequate.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

There is evidence of some improvement since the last inspection. The school has recently reduced its annual intake of pupils from 35 to 30 in order to ensure that over the longer term class sizes throughout the school will be more manageable. Decisive action taken to recruit and appoint an additional class teacher and an assistant headteacher has increased capacity and created an additional teaching group. This, coupled with a re-organisation of some pupils into mixed age classes has facilitated an immediate reduction in the number of pupils in each class from the mid-thirties per class to between 25 and 29. However, not enough consideration has been taken of the increased curriculum demands of mixed year groups or how to monitor and evaluate the potential impact of this strategy on those pupils who are in mixed age classes; especially the small group of Year 6 pupils who are in the mixed Year 5/6 class.

Attendance continues to be satisfactory overall and exclusion rates remain low. A very small proportion of pupils are away too often and this pushes the school's rate of persistent absenteeism to around 1% higher than is usually found. The school is aware that it needs to take appropriate steps to reduce this. During the course of this visit inspectors noted that the punctuality of some pupils is not as good as it should be. The school is now aware of the need to tackle this rigorously and reinforce the importance of punctuality amongst pupils and parents/carers.

The creation of a higher level teaching assistant role has supported the development of clearer procedures to manage the small number of pupils who have behavioural difficulties. There are early signs that this action is proving effective in minimising disruption in the classroom. Pupils say that they generally feel happier at school and safer at break times because behaviour has improved since the last inspection. The new whole school code of conduct and the recent work by pupils to draw up their own class codes is already having a positive impact. Pupils talked to inspectors about



how misbehaviour affects others with maturity and sensitivity and were very clear about the new system of sanctions and rewards. They report that this is working well because they all understand 'the rules' and teachers are using these consistently.

It is too early in the new school year to judge sustained and increased pupil engagement and the wider creation of positions of responsibility for them to take on. Nevertheless, the school council has been strengthened and through it, pupils are already being given greater responsibility and having an increased say in the life of the school. Pupils are rising to this opportunity and taking their responsibilities seriously. Pupils in the Year 6 class appreciate the additional responsibility that mentoring younger children in the Early Years Foundation Stage gives them and the opportunity to wear a slightly different uniform.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Make sure pupils are taught in stable groups of a reasonable size – satisfactory.
- Ensure pupils accept greater responsibility – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching and learning has not improved since the previous inspection. One third of the lessons observed during this visit were inadequate. In many lessons expectations of all pupils are still too low and the new learning has not been based securely on previous knowledge and skills. There are a few good examples of the recording of individual pupil's difficulties within a lesson that are then taken forward to inform the next lesson, but this is not yet evident in the majority of classes. Teaching in Key Stage 2 remains too variable. Consequently, pupils are not achieving as well as they should by the time they leave the school.

Some of the weaknesses that remain unaddressed and which were observed during this visit include: setting exactly the same work for all pupils despite a wide range of ability across the class; finishing lessons too early and moving on to the next subject without checking what learning has taken place and too few opportunities to extend pupils' learning further.

The support provided by teaching assistants is still inconsistent and as a result their impact on accelerating progress varies. In the most effective sessions staff have a very clear understanding of each pupil's needs and their questioning probes individual's thinking and supports them in absorbing the new learning. In the least successful sessions, support staff spend far too long on menial tasks that have no impact in extending pupils' skills or understanding.

The school has a very large amount of data about pupils' attainment as well as various tracking systems, but this is still not being used to good effect. The result is



that staff are presented with too many forms of information of varying quality and they are unclear about which to use and how to interpret it meaningfully. This in turn does not allow a focussed and detailed analysis of progress to identify what is working well in lessons, what needs to be done to improve provision and where individual support needs to be prioritised. This confusion creates a massive barrier to the use of information to record and communicate the progress of different groups and individual pupils and to establishing the right targets and interventions.

Whilst whole class and group targets have now been set, several are far too vague. This is reducing pupils' understanding of what they need to do next to build on their learning. Many of the older pupils understand that their targets are in the front of their exercise books and good quality classroom displays reinforce these targets for them. However, there is very little reference either to group or individual targets during lessons and very few pupils are able to recall their targets, particularly in mathematics or understand their true purpose: pupils do not expect to use their targets in order to track their own progress and take an active role in their learning.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning so that more of it is good – inadequate.
- Make better use of pupils' targets for learning – inadequate.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

There has been a lack of urgency and direction in implementing actions to address the priorities identified in the last inspection report. Several different improvement plans are in place which reiterate the same actions in different formats. This has created confusion, a lack of clarity and resulted in an inability to act decisively. Not all actions in these plans are appropriately staged and whilst responsibilities have been allocated, suitably robust quantitative and qualitative success criteria are not apparent.

Coherent systems for monitoring and evaluating provision are still not in place. As a result, it is unclear who will monitor actions, what evaluation methods will be used and where responsibility for evaluating the impact of actions lies. A comprehensive self-evaluation has not been undertaken since February 2009, which pre-dates the last inspection. A suitable record of the actions the school has taken to achieve improvement against the areas identified in the last inspection report has not been maintained; nor is there a systematic and rigorous analysis and review of the impact of the steps that have been taken so far. Whilst some monitoring of lessons has taken place, these are haphazardly recorded and not analysed rigorously enough to inform future planning and map out training and development needs with any precision.



Other weaknesses in management remain apparent. Information about pupil's progress is not used effectively as a monitoring tool, to hold staff to account for pupils' performance or to inform the school's strategic direction. Other management information and planning systems seen during this visit such as records of training and development activities, minutes of meetings and samples of pupils work are equally weak and have not been linked effectively to improvement actions.

Actions to enable governors to hold the school more closely to account are developing satisfactorily. There are some early signs of improvement as a result. Parent representatives have been recruited to the governing body. The two experienced governors from other schools recruited by the LA are now providing good models for governorship and creating a much clearer picture about what governors should expect from the school. Minutes of recent meetings show that governors are now asking the right questions in order to hold the school to account. However, as yet these have not always resulted in appropriate answers.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Make leadership and management more effective – inadequate.
- Enable governors to hold the school to account more – satisfactory.

External support

The revised LA statement of action is not matched closely enough to the needs of the school and has not improved significantly in response to the comments Ofsted raised about the original version. The statement in its current form focuses too much on reviewing the progress of the action plan rather than on success measures; that is, how the outcomes for pupils and the impact of actions taken in the school and by the LA will be monitored and evaluated.

The LA has provided and brokered considerable support for the school but this has not been targeted effectively so far. Consequently there is very little evidence to show that the resource invested has had any impact to date against the majority of areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report. Nevertheless, actions taken by the LA to support and develop governance are beginning to have an impact. The recent engagement of a local consultant headteacher as a mentor /advisor is greatly valued by the school's headteacher but it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this support.

Priorities for further improvement

- Intensify actions to improve pupils' writing throughout the school as a matter of urgency.



- Improve the quality of learning in order to accelerate pupils' progress and provide more challenge, especially for the more able pupils.
- Simplify the action plan and devise effective methods for evaluating and reporting on the school's progress.
- Streamline the tracking system so that it is readily understood and used by staff for core subjects in the first instance.
- Ensure reliable assessment methods are in place to monitor pupils' progress accurately and target interventions effectively.

