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Mrs K Hall  
Headteacher  
Willow Tree Primary School  
Willow Tree Avenue  
St Helens  
Merseyside  
WA9 4LZ

Dear Mrs Hall

#### Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 10 November 2009 and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. Please convey my thanks to your chair of governors, the representatives from the local authority and to the staff and pupils with whom I met.

Since the last inspection a new headteacher took up post in September 2009. A National Leader in Education is working with the school on a part-time basis supporting the new headteacher. Two teachers have taken voluntary redundancy. The school faced considerable building work during the summer term 2009 which meant some classes had to be relocated throughout the school. Analysis of the school's data shows that a third of the pupils did not start their education at this school.

As a result of the inspection on 5 and 6 November 2008, the school was asked to raise standards, especially in writing and to improve the quality of teaching and learning so that all pupils, especially those who are more able, are challenged.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school has made satisfactory progress in making improvements and satisfactory progress in demonstrating a better capacity for sustained improvement.

There has been a step change at the school and progress in tackling the two areas for improvement from the last inspection has accelerated markedly from September 2009. This is because the new headteacher is driving forward improvement with tenacity and determination.



Unvalidated data from the 2009 national tests shows that standards remain low at the end of both Key Stages except for mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 which improved from 2008 and was broadly average. This included a quarter of the pupils gaining the higher level 5. Standards therefore remain a concern for school in both subjects in Key Stage 1 and in English at Key Stage 2.

The picture is better with regard to the progress pupils make from their starting points. This is improving but it is too early to see this reflected more fully in the national tests. However, the school's own records show that the intervention programmes being employed from September, such as the commercial phonics based programme, are accelerating the rate of progress pupils are making enabling them to catch up with their learning. Moreover, in Key Stage 1 around 50% of the pupils have made progress in reading in seven weeks that would normally be expected in nearly three times that period. In Years 3 and 4 in mathematics around 60% of the pupils are making the same rate of progress. The school reports that there were some inaccurate teacher assessments in upper Key Stage 2 last year. This has now been tackled and the school is confident that assessments across the school are now secure. However, a second round of assessments for these pupils has not yet taken place and therefore their progress since September cannot be verified. Other strategies employed by the school are also showing promising signs. Curriculum changes designed to engage boys more with their learning has led to the attainment gap between boys and girls at level 2b reducing to less than 10%. Each of the Year 6 pupils who gained level 3 in writing at the end of Key Stage 1 appear on track to gain the expected level 5.

The quality of teaching and learning is improving steadily. Monitoring of lessons by the headteacher compared to earlier monitoring undertaken by the local authority shows that more lessons are good although inconsistency among teachers and from the same teachers is still evident. Teaching and learning are improving for a number of reasons. Well targeted professional development has been provided for staff. Lesson monitoring by the headteacher has resulted in clear feedback to teachers and the headteacher's recent and relevant experience as a literacy consultant has given her both credibility and a good insight into what improvements are required. As a consequence expectations of what the pupils can and should achieve have been raised. Plans for raising attainment are well laid out and effectively monitored.

Systems to check on pupils' learning have improved. The school's marking policy, for example, has been revised and subsequent checks on the application of the policy show that it is more consistent and helpful to pupils. A new system for managing behaviour has been introduced and pupils are clear about how they can earn merits and about the consequences of misbehaviour.

The school takes safeguarding seriously and its arrangements to ensure the well-being of the pupils are good. Appropriate checks are made and recorded when staff



are recruited to the school. Records of concerns are gathered, acted upon and monitored effectively.

The school has valued the good support it has received from the local authority. The work of its consultants, the National Leader in Education and a leading teacher from another school have been focused clearly on need. The local authority is monitoring the progress the school is making through termly reviews.

Planning for school improvement and monitoring of these plans are more effective. Staff have responded well and share the vision the headteacher has created and know what is needed to realise this. Governors too share this desire and priority. The school is aware of the necessary next steps to make the quality of teaching consistently good in order to raise standards and to identify and tackle underachievement. Nevertheless improvements are yet to be sustained as they have been evident mainly from the beginning of this academic year; before that progress was much slower.

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

Eric Craven  
Her Majesty's Inspector