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Mr Steve Hudson
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hudson

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Ashwood Park Primary School

Following my visit with Susan Lewis, Additional Inspector, to your school on 9 and 10 February, 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in May 2009. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed without prior consultation with Her Majesty's Inspector.

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 Dudley MBC.

Yours sincerely

Ceri Morgan

Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Ashwood Park Primary school Report from the second monitoring inspection on 09 and 10 February 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the full teaching staff, headteacher, representatives of the senior management team and governors. Every teacher was observed teaching and inspectors also observed the work of the Early Years Foundation Stage and the specialist unit for pupils with hearing impairment, although neither of these aspects of provision had been judged as inadequate on the original inspection. Inspectors regularly sought the views of pupils, both formally and informally. Inspectors also met with representatives of the Local Authority.

Context

The school continues to experience changes to staffing although these are starting to settle. The new headteacher took up his post in January 2010, around 5 weeks before this monitoring visit. One member of staff is now on long term absence and the school anticipates some further additions to the membership of the governing body and teaching staff in the near future. Despite these changes the senior management team have been restructured and there is an improved capacity and clarity regarding their roles.

The school continues to benefit from considerable support from a range of consultants and advisors of the Local Authority. All other aspects of the school remain as in the published inspection report of May 2009.

Main findings

Ashwood Park is now improving securely in all aspects although this improvement is bringing with it some new inconsistencies and variation evident in pupil progress and the quality of teaching. One teacher and a governor, quite independently of each other, described the recent improvements by saying that 'the language of the school is now different'. They meant by this that the focus was now on individual pupil progress and much hard work and discussion now takes place about how this could be enhanced. The school remains a delightful place to visit. Both pupils and staff are welcoming and open about their work and are now taking regular change in their stride. There is a genuine focus on improvement throughout the school with pupils keen to play their part. They recognise the efforts being made on their behalf by adults. Pupils enjoy their time here and inspectors saw many smiles both during lessons and outside. Relationships between adults and pupils are encouraging and positive. This is a caring school.

Behaviour is good and often exemplary, especially when the quality of teaching is strong. Attendance is above average and pupils say that they enjoy their time here, especially the practical activities and clubs that are on offer. The quality of teaching itself continues to improve and during this visit no inadequate teaching was observed, although no outstanding teaching was observed either. Similarly, attainment and achievement are in line with national averages and now satisfactory although there are some inconsistencies between groups of pupils and classes. The appointment of the new Headteacher and a restructuring of the leadership team have improved the capacity of leadership to sustain this improvement. Governance is satisfactory and about to be supported by new appointments but is increasingly holding the school to account. There is a large team of teaching assistants which provides good help to pupils identified as in need of greater support.

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

The standards reached by pupils when they leave the school at age 11 continue to improve and are now satisfactory in mathematics and reading but with some weaknesses in writing, especially amongst the more able pupils. Girls generally outperform boys and pupils make less progress in some year groups than in others. Despite the improvement overall it is these inconsistencies that are now a priority for the school to iron out.

The 2009 tests showed standards to be satisfactory but with some significant variation. Eighty per cent of all pupils reached the required level in mathematics but only 69% did so in English with particular weaknesses in writing. Similarly 32% of all pupils managed the higher levels in mathematics but just over 20% in English. There were similar variations in the amount of progress being made by pupils with girls outperforming boys, particularly in literacy, and pupils making much more rapid progress in Years 5 and 6 than in the younger age classes. This inconsistency is a result of variable standards of teaching and an over generous assessment system of tracking pupil progress as they passed through the school.

Standards in Key Stage 1 are now satisfactory. Particular strengths are good speaking and listening skills, an increasingly secure grasp of basic number in all ages and strong knowledge and understanding of information and communications technology (ICT). There are however some continued weaknesses, mainly as a legacy of previously weak teaching rather than what is provided now. These weaknesses include poor handwriting, weak use of spelling strategies and fragile understanding of basic grammar and sentence construction. In mathematics, pupils have a satisfactory grasp of basic number but are less secure when using the vocabulary of shape and space. During the monitoring visit pupils were given an opportunity to investigate and explore a wide range of problem solving strategies in mathematics. Although this is a welcome development it also highlighted how the legacy of poor literacy still undermines problem solving in other subjects.

Progress since the monitoring visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and achievement, particularly in writing and mathematics at Key Stage 2, by frequently checking the rate of progress for all groups of pupils through clearly recorded data – satisfactory progress

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching continues to improve. During the visit no inadequate teaching was observed and just over half of the observed teaching was judged to be good. It is this improvement that is securing the improved pupil progress. Key strengths observed were strong relationships between adults and pupils', planning that is much more appropriate for pupils of differing abilities and good use of resources. This included some imaginative use of the interactive whiteboards.

A key feature of the stronger lessons was particularly effective use of assessment although this is stronger in the classes for older pupils. Almost all teachers now encourage pupils to recognise their 'steps to success'. This is a technique which seeks to make sure all pupils know what they are doing and why, and that they can identify for themselves what it is they need to do to achieve more. One pupil knew that his target was to 'improve his use of connectives in passive speech as that was what would help him to do well in his tests'. This, coupled with good questioning and discussion, particularly through the use of 'talking partners', is helping pupils get a much more realistic view of their own strengths and areas for improvement.

Despite the improvement in teaching quality there remain some aspects that are at best satisfactory. There is a tendency to produce lessons that are 'safe' rather than ambitious and, once again, no outstanding teaching was observed although some came close. However there are signs of increased ambition in some classes, particularly in Years 5 and 6, where some of the strongest teaching was seen. Here, very good open ended investigative activities which allowed pupils to work independently and at higher levels of challenge were evident. The pace of learning is variable throughout the school and, as in the previous visit, there were frequent occasions where teachers accepted a simple answer rather than asking supplementary questions which required more challenging language. This is an example of how levels of challenge and pace, although improving, remain low at times. The introductory parts of lessons for the youngest pupils are sometimes too long or slow or dominated by teachers. It remains the case that not all teachers have given enough thought as to how best to reintegrate pupils into lessons when they have been out of the class for other reasons. This reduces the progress they are can make in those sessions

The curriculum and use of time has been changed since the last inspection visit and is now satisfactory. The timings of the day have been changed to increase the time spent learning and the pupils have accepted the changes with enthusiasm, despite the loss of the much loved 'golden time'. They understand the reasons why and speak highly of increased enjoyment of lessons and they are proud of their school

and their own achievements. They secretly hope for an occasional 'golden time' again once a term instead of each week as a reward for their increased efforts.

Teachers' marking is now satisfactory but varies from class to class. At its best pupils are given a useful mix of praise and constructive advice. Marking is usually up to date but does not always provide great depth in a child friendly way. Too often it is written for the schools' administrative benefit rather than the pupils. The use of curriculum targets is now well established although they are not yet always updated frequently enough. The specialist hearing impaired unit is satisfactory and both mainstream school staff and those who work in the unit are keen to share their professional experiences more thoroughly with each other. This does not yet happen frequently.

The pupils themselves know the school is improving. They are delightfully responsive, love taking additional responsibility and try hard to please their teachers. In discussion they were rightly appalled at the thought that there might be any racism or bullying in school and were adamant that it simply 'didn't happen here'. They clearly enjoy their time at Ashwood Park and attendance levels are good. There is an increasingly accurate pupil progress tracking system although the detailed discussions which would help to identify those pupils at risk of underachievement are still new. As a consequence their accuracy is not yet secure.

Progress since the first monitoring visit on the areas for improvement:

- Remove the inadequate teaching and raise the proportion of good teaching by improving teachers' use of assessment information in lessons so that they are able to challenge all pupils to do their best, particularly those who are more able - satisfactory progress
- Give better guidance to pupils by making more effective use of marking and targets to enable pupils to know exactly what they have to do to improve - satisfactory progress

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The newly appointed headteacher has made a good start. He brings with him experience and ambition and the pupils already warm to his style. He has managed to secure the confidence of the wider school community quickly and already made several required changes, not least the improving the timings of the school day and making some strong appointments to the teaching staff. He has an accurate view of the schools strengths and weaknesses after only five weeks in post.

The restructuring of the wider leadership team that was initiated last term has helped to increase capacity to improve. In particular it has helped add some clarity to the role of deputy headteacher, which now allows her to fulfil the role fully rather than lower level administrative tasks. Although relatively new, there is increasing enthusiasm by the wider leadership team to engage with a rigorous programme of

monitoring in their subjects. This aspect of school improvement is less well developed and there is not yet a full timetable for the monitoring of the quality of teaching or the impact of any professional development. To date it has focussed on pupil workbooks and planning and is not closely linked to the outcomes of any analysis of performance data. The limited contribution towards revised school strategic documents remains and there are appropriate plans to rewrite the school improvement plan and self evaluation form.

Governors have now embarked on their programme of regular school visits and are keen to fulfil their commitment to both support and challenge school leaders with a refreshed sense of professionalism. Records of meetings show that key questioning and rigorous monitoring is much more commonplace. There are also appropriate plans to strengthen further the work of the governing body by the appointment of governors with relevant expertise and parent governors. They increasingly work strategically and recognise that, although the amount of additional support offered by teaching assistants is good, the current high levels of resource will become unsustainable over time as the school budget comes under increased pressure.

Progress since the first monitoring visit on the areas for improvement:

- Set a clear direction for the school that focuses on improvements to achievement and quality of teaching by strengthening the role of all leaders and holding all staff accountable for pupils' progress – satisfactory progress.

External support

The Local authority has continued to provide generous and high quality support in terms of consultant and advisory time. This is valued by the school. Despite some recent discussion it remains a priority to redefine the focus and extent of this in partnership with the new headteacher. This is to help secure the growing capacity for the school to become self sufficient.

The quality of external support – satisfactory

Priorities for further improvement

- Eliminate the inconsistencies in the quality of teaching by increasing the proportion of good or better teaching. Achieve this by showing greater ambition, pace and imagination in lessons and ensuring effective monitoring takes place.
- Enhance the curriculum further to allow for greater pupil excitement and involve pupils more in independent working.
- Secure a greater capacity in middle management by developing the skills of the new team in monitoring their colleagues' work.