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Mrs D De Wolf
Elmhurst School
Dunsham Lane
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Buckinghamshire
HP20 2DB

Dear Mrs De Wolf

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Elmhurst School

Following my visit with Ken Bryan, Additional Inspector, to your school on 13 -14 January 2010, 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 July 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 vice-chair of governors and the Corporate Director of Children and Young People for Buckinghamshire.

Yours sincerely

Carmen Rodney
Her Majesty's Inspector



Special measures: monitoring of Elmhurst School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 13-14 January 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and middle managers, groups of pupils, the vice-chair of governors, the senior local authority adviser, the school improvement partner and the senior consultant who works with the headteacher.

Context

Following the last inspection, a number of staffing changes have taken place. Two teachers, including a member of the senior team, resigned. A third member of staff, on maternity leave, also resigned at the end of the last term. As a result of these resignations, the headteacher has restructured the senior leadership team. Two assistant headteachers and three middle managers were appointed internally to temporary posts and a decision has been made to recruit a deputy headteacher in the current term. The temporary posts will last until the end of the school year, July 2010. Attempts to recruit and appoint teachers to the substantive positions were not successful and three long-term supply teachers, with previous knowledge of the school, are employed temporarily. The chair of governors resigned towards the end of the autumn term 2009. The vice-chair of governors is acting as chair.

The school was formed in 2007 after the existing junior school enlarged to embrace the adjoining infant school. The merger continues to present challenges, as leaders attempt to close the gaps in pupils' learning and to ensure that achievement does not decline any further.

As a result of severe weather conditions, the inspection began later than planned on the first day. The schedule was therefore reorganised when the school closed at midday. The time was used to scrutinise documentary evidence and conduct some interviews before completing the inspection on day two. Limited time meant that wider issues linked to the outcomes for pupils and aspects of the quality of provision, including the curriculum and the quality of care, guidance and support, were not the main focus of this monitoring inspection.

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

Standards in all years remain low and achievement is still too low. Pupils are, however, beginning to make better progress in lessons, particularly towards achieving the set whole-school and class targets. Nevertheless, lower ability pupils tend to make less progress than their peers. In comparison, most pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities make the progress expected. Pupils who are



withdrawn from lessons to receive extra support in reading are also making better progress in developing their reading and comprehension skills.

Pupils love to learn and enjoy attending school, and even when lessons are not inspiring, self-motivation is high; they show curiosity and try hard to succeed at whatever work they are given. But as yet, the teachers have not yet harnessed these positive features to increase pupils' independent learning skills, their thinking or accelerate their progress.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils' behaviour is never less than good and is a positive contributory factor to them working engagingly and absorbedly in lessons. Pupils work well in pairs or in small groups. Despite their interest in learning, and average and improving attendance, most are still not well prepared with at least satisfactory basic skills for the next stage of their learning.

The effectiveness of provision

There have been marginal improvements in the quality of teaching since the last inspection. Some examples of good elements of teaching were observed during the monitoring inspection. Emerging good practice includes improving consistency in the way that teachers make use of learning objectives and/or WALT (what we are learning today) to identify what pupils are learning. Teachers are beginning to use individual pupil targets and 'Me Time' to review and assess pupils' understanding of their targets. However, there is inconsistency in the use of these initiatives and assessment information to raise standards. Teachers rarely refer to assessment to demonstrate what pupils can aspire to achieve. All pupils have a target for literacy and numeracy, and discussions with different ability groups during the inspection showed that they can talk with understanding about their targets and how they are set. Observation of 'Me Time' during the inspection confirmed that the rigorous process to focus on setting and explaining individual pupil targets is weakened because discussion is too abstract as exemplar materials are not used to illustrate the standard of work expected.

In too many lessons, teacher talk dominates and stifles pupils' thinking. There was insufficient challenge and rigour for the more able pupils for problem solving; teaching assistants were not used consistently well to support pupils; lesson objective did not always outline the skills pupils would acquire and there was little modelling to illustrate the standards pupils should aim for. Although learning objectives are shared, there is too little consolidation through mini-summaries during and at the end of lessons. Expectations of pupils and the pace of learning, although improving, are not high enough because there is still not enough consistently good teaching to significantly improve their rates of progress and raise attainment. The changes made so far have yet to mature.



Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Raise teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve and ensure that middle-ability and more able pupils are set work that challenges and extends them - inadequate
- Ensure that in all lessons pupils have a clear understanding of what they are expected to learn and that they all know their target for improvement – inadequate

The effectiveness of leadership and management

There is a clear recognition among middle managers that there has been a significant shift in emphasis since the last inspection; previously low expectations and standards are seen as unacceptable and there is more focus on improving pupils' attainment. The efforts to drive improvement are linked to the 'new life' that the headteacher has breathed into the school following the last inspection. This has been possible because of the very good support from the local authority, which is enabling the school to first, reassess its strengths and weaknesses, and second, identify the next steps to ensure that the provision is effective and leading to pupils making better progress. As a result of the re-evaluation, the headteacher has been open and honest about the style of leadership skills needed to drive the school forward. The school now has a clear direction for improving outcomes which is at the heart of the raising achievement programme (RAP).

Senior leaders, with the support of the senior headteacher consultant who works with the headteacher, have a clear picture of where the school should be by the end of the academic year and beyond this period of time. Swift and decisive actions have been taken to eradicate inadequate teaching and to move staff on who are unable to meet the challenges. Leaders and managers at all levels understand and embrace the vision; they work together as a team and spread the benefits of their training and experience; morale is high and they have begun to articulate and reflect on how they can best improve the quality of the provision. The newly created leadership team is enthusiastic and is beginning to demonstrate some of the leadership skills to drive improvement. For instance, very good external support and some exposure to good practice are leading to them knowing and understanding how to deliver the shared and corporate vision for improvement. However, the team is inexperienced and, although several members are pursuing a nationally recognised course, they have not had sufficient time to sharpen and extend their leadership and management skills. For instance, they are not involved in lesson observations or performance management. Leaders and managers can talk convincingly about the changes necessary but these are not being implemented consistently. Further developmental work is planned for them.

Planning for improvement is profuse. Standard practices such as lesson planning, using assessment systems, action plans, subject audits and monitoring and



evaluation of work have been reviewed. Targets and plans for the future are ambitious. Approaches to improve teaching and learning are developing but there has not been enough time to embed and measure the full impact on outcomes for pupils. Additionally, while much work has been done to improve teaching and learning, observation of lessons and feedback have not had the desired impact on teachers making and sustaining improvements to their teaching. Much is being done to make improvements, although the impact of the school's actions on pupils' progress is often not evaluated with sufficient rigour. The key issues for improving teaching and learning are sometimes lost in the range of planned actions. For example, systems for collecting and using data to analyse the progress of different groups of pupils are still developing and there is not a consistent approach to action planning or evaluating pupils' work.

Governors are supportive and committed to the school but they are not well established; most are inexperienced and new to governance. They have been strengthened by an additional and experienced governor provided by the local authority. With guidance and support from the local authority, the governors have started to analyse data on pupils' achievement and ask questions about provision but at this stage in the school's redevelopment, they have insufficient capacity to ensure that there is consistent and rigorous challenge to accelerate pupils' progress.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Focus leaders' monitoring on the progress that pupils make in lessons and over time, on rigorously analysing performance and on identifying where provision can be improved – inadequate.

External support

The local authority has consistently provided extensive and intensive support prior to and increasingly so after the last inspection. The level of support is clearly outlined in a detailed statement of action which fully meets requirements. The very good financial and human resource including a School Improvement Partner, various specialist subject consultants as well as senior and middle status staff from outstanding schools, and senior officers from the authority ensure that the staff do not lose sight of the key issues. The support is well directed on what the school needs and managed by the partnership work with senior leaders. In this, the review group is used well to assess the school's progress and to ensure that the emerging changes can be sustained. The support from the local authority will therefore remain until the school has increased its capacity without relying on external guidance.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that provision is sharply focused on the needs of lower attaining pupils so that they can begin to make better progress.

