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Ms Paula Moreton
Acting headteacher
Upton Heath CE Primary School
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Upton-by-Chester
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CH2 1ED

Dear Ms Moreton

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Upton Heath CE Primary School

Following my visit with Dee Brigstock, additional inspector, to your school on 27 and 28 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 September 2009. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

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 the Interim Executive Board, the Director of Children and Young People's Services Cheshire West and Chester, and the diocese.

Yours sincerely

Sonja Øyen
Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Upton Heath CE Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 27 and 28 January 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, the chair and another member of the Interim Executive Board, the Parent Champion, five middle managers, the acting deputy headteacher in her role as special educational needs coordinator, the assistant director for Children's and Young People's Services, and spoke to the School Improvement Partner by telephone.

Context

Since the inspection in September, the substantive headteacher has remained absent and the acting headteacher has continued in role. Supply teachers have the responsibility for two classes. Three members of staff left the school at the end of the autumn term, including the office manager and an assistant headteacher. A second assistant headteacher relinquished the leadership position. The local authority has seconded an experienced deputy headteacher to the school for the spring term to strengthen senior leadership. She has no class responsibility and is taking the lead in overseeing the provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and in developing the school's systems to track and evaluate pupils' progress. A second deputy headteacher is working in the school two days each week to develop teaching and learning in Years 3 and 4 and to mentor the two newly qualified teachers. A teacher returned to the school in January after maternity leave and another, seconded to the local authority from January, works with pupils in Years 5 and 6 three days each week. In the light of staffing changes, classes were reorganised at the end of the autumn term. Three classes have teachers who job share.

The governors and diocese supported the decision of the local authority to apply to the Secretary of State to establish an Interim Executive Board to replace the governing body. This came into being in January 2010 with six members including a chair with extensive knowledge and experience of school governance. The chair of the former governing body, newly appointed in the autumn term, has taken on the role of Parent Champion.

The local authority has appointed a new School Improvement Partner and increased the support available from the Challenge and Improvement Advisor.

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

Pupils' positive attitudes to school, their strong self-motivation and ready acceptance of how things are, mask underperformance and underachievement. Although many are working at or close to the level expected for their age, pupils are coasting and not giving of their best for most of the time. High quality art work highlights the untapped potential in other areas. Work in pupils' books varies in the quality of presentation and content. In some subjects and classes there is little from the autumn term to indicate progress in learning. In lessons, particularly at Key Stage 2, there were too many times when pupils were not challenged by the content, the pace or the expected outcomes for the activities and tasks. In addition, pupils' progress is hindered by teachers' insecure subject knowledge.

On the whole, the quality of pupils' writing falls far below their oral language competence. Pupils are, in the main, highly articulate, fluent, mature speakers who listen attentively and critically and who draw on a good bank of knowledge and experience. This shows in their ideas for writing and the vocabulary used, although few written stories, reports and records match the richness heard in conversations and discussions. Pupils' writing is riddled with spelling errors and inaccurate or absent punctuation. Handwriting is often poor. The school now realises it faces the dual task of dealing with the legacy of poor habits and gaps in learning while also raising the bar substantially to get the best out of the pupils.

The results from externally marked tests have underlined the unreliability of existing school data on pupils' attainment and progress. In some cases, there is more than one level of attainment's difference (plus and minus) between test results and teacher assessment. As the teachers do not all have an accurate picture of each pupil's starting point in reading, writing and different aspects of mathematics, they are unable to pitch the work consistently at the right level. While pupils are moving on in their learning, this is too often despite the teaching.

Progress since the last inspection on the area for improvement:

- Raise pupils' attainment and accelerate their progress, particularly for the more able – inadequate

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils generally are polite, diligent and know how to behave in all situations. Although Reception Year children could hardly contain their excitement when a letter from Mr Crocodile invited them to follow his clues to find their hidden snack, they behaved impeccably in waiting for all to don boots, coats, hats and to get a drink to take outside. However, in a few classes, especially where there is instability in staffing, some pupils, mainly boys, find it hard to sustain their attention or are quick to misbehave. This is affecting the learning of others.

The effectiveness of provision

Pupils are underachieving because of weaknesses and inconsistencies in the teaching. This was not helped in the autumn term by the reluctance of some staff to follow new procedures and to act on the guidance of consultants from the local authority. Many staff have missed out in previous years on training in how to teach reading, writing and mathematics in a systematic, progressive way and how to ensure that learning is personalised. The need to go back to basics has slowed the development programme. Teachers' expectations are higher regarding planning lessons, organising classrooms to support learning, providing a range of learning experiences and drawing on national guidance. Staff commented that agreeing 'non-negotiables' in relation to classrooms and planning, has led to a far stronger, more positive team approach this term. The use of themes and activities from the International Primary Curriculum (a commercial scheme) has accentuated the breadth and depth of pupils' knowledge and helped teachers to raise starting points. Pupils are being asked to talk to partners, to explain their reasoning and to work on practical tasks. Teaching flair is beginning to show in the use of interactive whiteboards and practical, engaging activities such as the dartboard for Year 6 pupils to solve mathematical problems and bookmarks for Year 2 pupils to remind them of their targets. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go to ensure greater consistency of approach throughout the school and to ensure that all pupils get a buzz out of lessons. Too little is being done to harness the competitive spirit between pupils and to show them how they can excel.

In some classes, pupils benefit from confident, structured teaching. The teachers know what they want the pupils to learn and the steps needed to ensure it. They question the pupils well to probe their understanding. They also keep a keen eye on how well pupils are doing and set new challenges for individuals. However, there is still too much teaching that is not good enough to boost pupils' learning. Opportunities are missed to question pupils' thinking and to help them realise for themselves how new learning builds on what they know. This is partly because teachers' own subject knowledge is patchy which results in unclear and sometimes inaccurate information and use of terminology. Not enough emphasis is given to ensuring that pupils understand each step in a new process and have all they need to complete a task. In some classes, there is not enough adult support.

The school is only at the start of building a clear, accurate picture of how well each pupil is doing across the curriculum. While there is a growing acceptance of accountability for pupils' learning, staff are unused to tailoring their teaching to ensure pupils achieve their targets. This is particularly evident in teachers' marking of pupils' work where much is over-praising. There are few examples of marking that truly challenges individuals or evaluates how well previous guidance has been followed. As a result, pupils do not act on the points made and repeat the same errors. A good example is the pupils' inconsistent use of capital letters and full stops to demarcate sentences despite teachers' frequent comments.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Raise the expectations of staff – satisfactory
- Broaden the range of teaching styles to stimulate pupils' greater involvement in learning – satisfactory
- Improve the quality of the curriculum to encourage pupils' independent skills – inadequate
- Make better use of assessment information to track pupils' progress and ensure lessons are more exciting and challenging – inadequate

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The acting headteacher has done sterling work to date in leading improvement despite several barriers to progress, including negativity and lack of cooperation from staff and parents, a high incidence of staff absence and an initial lack of relevant expertise and skill in the school's senior leadership team. She has gained an accurate view of the school's most pressing problems and the factors at work, and in so doing has established productive working partnerships with the local authority, other schools and the Interim Executive Board.

Senior staff seconded to the school are still finding their feet. Other staff stated there was a sea change in attitude evident since January and the positive influence of the two seconded deputy headteachers. The acting headteacher has made clear what she wants for the school and there is a tangible air of excitement in creating the 'new Upton Heath' and in living up to the new motto of 'learning together'. The newly formed team of five innovation leaders is raring to go; they have a clear picture of what is expected of them. A common comment from those with management responsibilities was, 'It's already on the list'.

The acting headteacher astutely placed an initial focus on improving the school environment. Pupils, staff and parents commented positively on the light and space resulting from the uncovering of classroom windows and de-cluttering of rooms. However, as work has continued, problems are turning out to be more deeply rooted than initially thought. For example, an audit of the school's information and communication technology shows that most of the laptops and other hardware are in need of urgent replacement. Administrative and educational systems are unreliable and outdated. Similarly, an audit of school stock has shown a vast surfeit of some materials and a dearth of others, including up-to-date reference books. The school does not have the resources it needs to deliver the full curriculum.

The Interim Executive Board has made a strong mark in a short time. Although not formally in place till January, it met in the autumn term to ensure that roles, responsibilities and lines of authority were clear. It also gained a well informed view of the school's standing in relation to staffing, provision and finances. The chair is very aware of pressing concerns facing the school and is giving good support and

challenge. The school is spending over its budget. Staffing costs are high yet the school does not have all the personnel it needs: for example, there are not enough teaching assistants to support pupils with particular learning needs and to deliver intervention programmes.

The acting headteacher and Interim Executive Board are also aware of the need to put in place systems and procedures essential to the smooth running of the school and to fulfilling statutory requirements. Given the enormity of this task, a sensible decision was to focus on the policies most needed and to ensure that all staff know and use the content to guide their practice. This has been very effective in the now high profile area of safeguarding where clear management responsibilities have been established, new practices introduced, essential training given and additional training planned for the year ahead. Much is new and a pattern of regular review has yet to develop. The required record of checks on adults' suitability to work with children is up to date and complete and the school is no longer in breach of a statutory requirement. The reorganisation of the school office, the procedures to verify visitors and the procedures at the start and end of the school day, have strengthened the school's safety, although some parents have still to value these changes.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Ensure that all safeguarding requirements are met – satisfactory
- Establish clear procedures that are regularly reviewed and understood by staff – satisfactory
- Ensure that the school's central record of checks on the suitability of adults to work with children is up to date – good
- Ensure that all staff and governors receive appropriate training – satisfactory
- Ensure leadership is effective in driving improvement and establishing clear procedures to check on the quality of the school's performance – satisfactory

External support

The support from the local authority has been good. Much was done before the publication of the Section 5 inspection report to put in place a programme of support in relation to the issues identified. At the meeting for parents, the assistant director gave a comprehensive overview of the school's situation and the action intended and expected by the authority. Officers have continued to respond to parents' concerns.

The statement of action has clear objectives and success criteria relating to pupils' attainment, the value added and the quality of teaching. In the autumn term, the plan steered the work of the National Strategy consultants and others with specialist expertise. As a result, the staff have had input on key aspects and been encouraged to use strategies, procedures and techniques that are common practice elsewhere. This monitoring inspection and the recent review by the local authority point to the need to reduce some of the input and to give time for practice to become established. However, this inspection also identifies some areas of urgent concern where the consultants' expertise and knowledge are especially profitable.

The School Improvement Partner has established expectations of pupils' progress and worked with the school to raise targets for the current Year 6.

Since September, the school has benefited from the support and services of the local authority in virtually every aspect of its work but particularly in resolving issues related to staffing and safeguarding.

At the first meeting of the review group, set up by the local authority, there was a clear focus on the issues that were hindering progress and what might be done to alleviate them, including drawing on expertise in other schools. The draft report from the whole-school review in January is detailed with 12 recommendations for action which reflect points drawn out in this report. It gives the school and local authority a clear picture of what has been done, where things have improved and where there are still concerns. It is less explicit in evaluating the impact of the action taken by its consultants.

Priorities for further improvement

To make a difference in the quality of teaching, the following are priorities:

- Classrooms to support pupils' learning in English and mathematics.
- Teachers' subject knowledge, especially in mathematics and writing.
- Marking to ensure that pupils improve the quality of their work.
- Teachers' questioning skills.
- Teachers' knowledge of the levels and sub levels of attainment in reading, writing and different aspects of mathematics.