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20 July 2010

Mrs B Ellers  
The Acting Headteacher  
Elmhurst School  
Dunsham Lane  
Aylesbury  
Buckinghamshire  
HP20 2DB

Dear Mrs Ellers

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Elmhurst School

Following my visit to your school on 6 and 7 July 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 second 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 – satisfactory.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory.

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 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 second monitoring inspection on 6 and 7 July 2010

### Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, senior and middle managers, the chair of the interim executive board, the School Improvement Partner, the senior consultant who works with the substantive headteacher and a few parents. Short visits were also made to a few lessons to observe guided reading and individual target setting sessions.

### Context

Since the last monitoring visit, an interim executive board was appointed in March. When the substantive headteacher had to leave the school in May for medical reasons, the part-time, seconded consultant deputy headteacher was offered a temporary appointment until the end of the summer term. This interim arrangement will end in July, as the substantive post-holder is expected to return to the school at the start of the new academic year.

At the time of the last visit, the senior team included the headteacher and two temporary assistant headteachers. The new structure includes several recent appointments including a deputy headteacher who will also become the temporary coordinator for special educational needs before a substantive appointment is made. The interim executive board has made suitable arrangements for a middle manager to provide support for the deputy headteacher, who will also take on the strategic role for leading and developing provision for special educational needs. Additionally, the two temporary key stage leaders were appointed to the substantive posts. Five members of staff left in the spring term and were replaced by experienced, long term supply teachers, who will be leaving at the end of the current term. Although there has been a high turnover of staff, with the exception of one mixed Year 3 class, the school has secured a full complement of experienced teachers for the start of September. The school and local authority are working together to appoint a temporary teacher for the mixed Year 3/4 class. Arrangements have also been made to appoint four more teaching assistants for September.

The number of pupils leaving or joining the school is increasingly high: 27 joined and 52 have left since the start of September 2009. This reduction in roll has introduced new challenges and necessitated changes for the school in relation to re-organising year groups and classes from September 2010. Year groups will therefore be taught in mixed classes, notably Years 1 and 2 together and Years 3 and 4 in the same group. Parents have duly been informed about the planned re-organisation. Major building changes to develop sections of the premises around the Years 1 and 2 bases are planned from September onwards.



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

Attainment, although still well below average, is improving. The most significant improvement is in Year 6 where provisional results in the national tests indicate that attainment is significantly much better than in 2009. The better progress, identified in the last monitoring visit, has increased this term. The improvement is linked to the more rigorous use of assessment systems to track pupils' progress and raise teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve. Tracking data show that while most pupils are making better progress, it is faster in Year 6, Key Stage 1 and in the Early Years Foundation Stage where there has been stability in staffing and, in particular, improved teaching in Year 6. A good range of strategies have been used to target groups of pupils including those with special educational needs/and or disabilities. Targeted support through breakfast clubs, individual tuition and reading programmes have led to the majority of these pupils making at least satisfactory progress from a low base. Although the gap in attainment is narrowing, too many pupils in Years 3, 4 and 5 are still working below age-related expectations. Middle leaders have a good understanding of the issues around attainment; they are more sharply focused on day-to-day teaching, and in challenging teachers to help pupils apply basic skills accurately across all of their work. The application of taught skills is, however, still developing.

## Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils who attend regularly enjoy school and are very keen to learn. Their behaviour is never less than good around the school. Pupils' enthusiasm towards learning is never dampened, even when lessons are satisfactory. Pupils enjoy participating in lessons, demonstrating their skills to others, working in pairs and answering questions. They readily undertake tasks and do not waste time. In practical lessons, such as science, they conduct themselves safely. In the playground, they mix well and relationships are positive between all pupils.

Senior leaders have done much to improve attendance and have succeeded in ensuring that it has not fallen below 93% since the last monitoring visit. A very small minority of pupils are persistently absent, but attendance is rigorously monitored and a range of procedures is in place to encourage parents to send their children to school. Medical conditions and unauthorised absence, including extended holidays, are the main factors affecting pupils' rate of attendance. There have been no exclusions of pupils this academic year.

## The effectiveness of provision

The school has benefited from the advice and support from the local authority. As a result, the quality of teaching and learning is never less than satisfactory, but teachers are not consistent in ensuring that the majority of lessons are good or



better to accelerate pupils' progress. Effective teaching captivates the pupils' minds, is challenging and well paced. It is based on lesson planning which is clear and shared well with pupils. Success criteria, although not always precise about the skills being taught, are referred to and explored with the pupils. Time is not wasted and there are opportunities for the pupils to work in pairs or individually and give feedback. In many instances, creative starter activities are used very well to engage pupils and increase their concentration. Close questioning is used well to probe pupils' thinking. Set tasks are often worked through carefully with the pupils. This helps them to know how to approach and develop their work. Expectations of what pupils could achieve are very clear. The short summaries enable the pupils to think carefully about how much they had learnt. Pupils are learning to apply their skills to solve problems, as illustrated in a Year 6 mathematics lesson where pupils were set a challenging task to solve the setting up and running of a fun-fair.

There remain, however, some lessons which, whilst having some of the above features, are less effective. In these, teachers do not make the best use of stimulating topics and resources are often not well matched to the aims of the lessons. Pupils are not shown how to apply the new skills they have learnt and there are fewer opportunities for them to reflect on, and discuss, their learning. As a result, their work lacks depth and new skills are not consolidated well. Pupils listen keenly but opportunities are often missed to extend their speaking skills because the teachers keep too rigidly to the set tasks even when the pupils ask interesting and challenging questions. Additionally, some teachers dominate too much and tasks are rushed. The needs of the higher attaining pupils are not consistently met and activities do not challenge them. In all lessons, teaching assistants are well briefed and contribute well to supporting the needs of individual pupils.

The curriculum is under review and initial changes are beginning to ensure that pupils have a balanced and stimulating experience. The senior and middle managers lead on developing the curriculum so that more subjects, other than English and mathematics, are appropriately covered. The timetable has been re-organised so that the curriculum has breadth and reasonable balance. For instance, there is more coverage of subjects such as music, religious education and science. Senior staff members are aware of the improvements needed across English and mathematics. For example, more attention is given to pupils in applying basic literacy skills across the curriculum. Consequently, new reading books have been ordered and there is more focus on developing reading skills and encouraging pupils to use 'word weavers', a reading buddy system involving competent readers supporting younger pupils. However, the school recognises that this work is undeveloped, as is guided reading and the use of the library. The curriculum review also takes into consideration the creative partnership work with an external provider. Suitable provision is in place to make sure that the curriculum is personalised for pupils whose circumstances make them vulnerable.

The school has focused on developing the foundations for effective assessment



procedures. This has begun to have an impact on lesson planning and teaching, although there is not a consistent approach to providing well for higher attaining pupils. Supported by the acting headteacher, the middle leaders have worked well to set up good systems for the tracking and recording of pupils' progress. The 'Me Time', reported in the last monitoring visit, has been further developed. There is greater clarity about personal targets during the one-to-one tuition, and effective use of visual resources to help pupils understand how well they are achieving and what they have to do to improve.

Effective arrangements are in place to support pupils during the transition process and include planned visits to new classes or to the secondary schools, followed by additional work to explore their experience. The preparatory work is personalised very well to support targeted pupils with specific learning and medical needs. Links with extended services are also used well to provide training for staff, support, and guidance for pupils.

Progress since the last visit 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 – satisfactory
- 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 – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The acting headteacher for most of the second half of the summer term has given thoughtful and measured leadership and, as a result, the rate of improvement has increased under the guidance and support of her guidance. She has quickly and clearly defined and articulated the priorities for school improvement and provided much stability and continuity for the staff. The ability to identify the priorities, and turn them into actions within a set time, has increased staff understanding of the changes that are needed. The simplification and clarification of the key areas for development have contributed to all staff, in particular the middle leaders and managers taking ownership for improvement. Middle managers recognise that the school 'has not done justice to the pupils' and, because they are more confident in driving improvement, they are challenging staff to accelerate pupils' progress. This improvement is also linked to the acting headteacher leading by example. She has worked alongside teachers in the classroom, introduced focused training every two weeks and been precise about honing in on specific parts of lessons, so that staff are in no doubt about the skills pupils should be developing.

Accountability has increased at all levels. Similarly, monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning are accurate and notes are often incisive. The middle leaders have been involved in observing lessons, most notably the Key Stage 1 leader. The



leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning and they have used suitable external training courses to develop the skills of the most effective teachers. The effectiveness of training and the raising achievement plan are evaluated regularly so that areas for improvement are identified as part of the improvement cycle.

The targeted support for groups of teachers who need to improve significantly their teaching has helped move teaching from being satisfactory to becoming increasingly good. The acting headteacher and middle managers are providing support to staff to ensure clear guidance is given to challenge all teachers to develop pupils' basic skills and encourage them to apply them across their work. Training and the improved use of tracking data, resources and accountability are all contributory factors that are helping the school to focus sharply on accelerating pupils' progress. The middle managers recognise that there is still more to do, for example in relation to developing assessment and monitoring, but they are more confident about their roles and responsibilities as managers. As part of the leadership team, they have increased their capacity to identify the next steps for development and the actions they need take.

The interim executive board has taken swift and decisive action to assess the direction and priorities for the school. The members have an accurate understanding of the school's current position and have the expertise and capacity to hold the school to account. There is more effective and strategic management in place. The chair of the interim executive board has a clear overview of the school's budget; spending is carefully monitored and targeted at appropriate resources and the upkeep of the premises. Steps have been taken to ensure that the interim executive board is fully representative of the school community. It has begun a cycle of evaluating policies and, as a result, of commissioning the local authority to review safeguarding, it has ensured that requirements are fully met. At this stage in the school's development, the chair of the interim executive board is very aware of the necessity to sustain the momentum of improvement.

Throughout the academic year, the school has failed to keep parents well informed and partnership work is undeveloped. While parents acknowledge that their children are safe, the message from them about poor communication comes across very strongly. Parents are unhappy about the progress of their children, the instability in staffing, and the quality of the curriculum. They are also concerned that lessons do not cater for individual needs. The small group of parents who provided evidence for the monitoring visit feel that there are 'too many excuses of failure'. They are of the opinion that it is unfair for the school to 'use English as an additional language' as a factor for low results because their children are fluent speakers of English. The inspection evidence endorses some of the parents' concerns but notes that the interim executive board has acted decisively to establish stability in staffing and is in the process of taking appropriate actions to introduce regular newsletters to parents. The school is aware that there is still more work to do to identify the numbers of



pupils who are at an early stage of learning English and to work closely with parents and reassure them about the changes taking place.

Progress since the last visit 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 – satisfactory.

#### External support

The interim executive board continues to offer very good support in relation to providing financial help and key personnel in order to accelerate the school's rate of progress in addressing underachievement. The local authority's School Improvement Partner/link adviser has provided very good advice and support to develop teaching and learning, the curriculum and aspects of leadership and management. The local authority recognises that results are too low and has provided experienced consultants, including one for the Improving Schools Programme and three advanced skills teachers to work alongside teachers in the classroom. The detailed reviews of the school's progress, the curriculum, and the commissioned audit on aspects of safeguarding include tough messages which have helped the leaders and managers to recognise shortcomings and the next steps for improvement.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- Improve communication with parents by keeping them well informed about the planned changes and involving them in their children's learning.