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13 May 2010

Mr Peter Martin
Acting Headteacher
Sherdley Primary School
Mill Lane
Sutton
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 4HA

Dear Mr Martin

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Sherdley Primary School

Following my visit with Gillian Salter-Smith, Additional Inspector, to your school on 11 and 12 May 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 November 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 chair of governors and the Director of Children and Young People's Services for St. Helens

Yours sincerely

Stephen Wall
Lead Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Sherdley Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 11 and 12 May 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, subject coordinators, a group of pupils, representatives of the governing body and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Subsequent to the last inspection of November 2009, the headteacher resigned in February 2010. Governors immediately appointed an acting headteacher to serve until the end of the current school year. A new, substantive headteacher has recently been appointed with effect from September 2010.

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

Since February 2010, improving achievement in pupils' English has been a focus for the school. Support from local authority consultants is helping teachers develop strategies to improve pupils' skills. Some early signs of impact are evident. Pupils' handwriting is improving across the school and older pupils in Key Stage 2 are becoming more competent and confident in developing their skills in extended writing. For example: they are increasingly able to use a range of sophisticated vocabulary to add interest and depth to their writing; and their skills in expressing themselves in more complex sentence structures are growing. However, improvement is not taking place uniformly across all classes because the quality of teaching is too inconsistent. While the school's assessment data shows signs of improvement in writing, this is not reflected in assessments for reading where attainment does not show signs of significant improvement. Mathematics and science have not yet received the same level of focused support for improvement as for English. Consequently, pupils' attainment, progress and achievement in mathematics and science are improving at a slower rate. This is supported by assessment data which shows attainment in mathematics and science corresponding to that in previous years. This acts as a powerful brake on accelerating progress. Overall, therefore, pupils' achievement is not accelerating rapidly or significantly enough to make up the ground necessary for them to achieve as well as they can or should.

Progress since the last inspection on the area for improvement:

- raise pupils' achievement in English, mathematics and science - inadequate

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Overall levels of attendance are improving. The proportion of pupils who are persistently absent is reducing significantly. Improvement is the result of better liaison with the local authority education welfare office in tackling poor attendance and working with parents and carers to promote the importance of regular attendance. Pupils say that behaviour is improving because teachers are applying sanctions more consistently. In lessons where teaching does not motivate pupils' interest, there is sometimes restlessness. Overall, however, pupils' behaviour in lessons and around school is improving. Because pupils' skills in literacy and numeracy are not yet high enough, pupils remain ill-equipped for future learning. Pupils are becoming more involved in the school community. This is adding to their sense of pride in their school and to their enjoyment. For example, the increasingly active school council was involved in the recent arrangements for appointing the new headteacher. Pupils are very excited by planning and constructing their new eco-garden in school.

The effectiveness of provision

Provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage is under development. At present it is not organised effectively enough to demonstrate significant improvement since the last inspection when it was judged as satisfactory. Plans are firmly in place for the coming academic year to reorganise the staffing, leadership and management of the Early Years Foundation Stage and make it more effective in laying stronger foundations for successful learning.

In the school as a whole, the quality of teaching is showing some signs of improvement but the pattern is inconsistent and there is too much satisfactory teaching to bring about the necessary rise in achievement quickly enough. A very small minority of teaching remains inadequate. The planning of lessons has improved and now follows a common format to guide teachers in the structure of their lessons. Lesson plans show that teachers are giving greater focus to clear learning objectives. However, planning is not consistently put into effective practice with the result that pupils are sometimes uncertain about what is expected of them. The degree of challenge in teaching is improving but remains variable. Where good teaching gets it right, pupils of all abilities make progress appropriate to their abilities. Overall, however, there is too much inconsistency in getting the level of challenge right for different groups of pupils and enabling them all, therefore, to make progress and to achieve appropriately for their abilities. Relationships between staff and pupils have improved. This is reflected in better general behaviour and attitudes to learning. This is partly due to the fact that teachers now spend more time in their classes teaching. Where weaknesses in teaching and learning remain,

the pace of learning is slow because pupils are not actively engaged in learning and they have to sit for too long listening to the teacher.

With the support of the local authority literacy consultant, the school has made a start on improving the quality of the curriculum. Recent professional development training is helping staff gain greater understanding of the National Strategy and how to implement its approaches more successfully and more creatively. As a result, teaching is now starting to implement strategies for pupils to make smaller steps in their learning. Awareness is growing of the necessity to match the content of lessons more closely to pupils' needs.

Pupils say they feel safe in school. They expressed no concerns about bullying identified by some pupils at the last inspection as an issue. As relationships improve across the school, pupils report they feel confident in being able to approach adults for help and support.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Since the last inspection, uncertainties in leadership and management have led to a slow start in getting improvement underway with the necessary pace and urgency to bring about sufficient improvement. Since the appointment of the acting headteacher, the pace of improvement is picking up gradually but still too slowly. The acting headteacher, with the support of other senior leaders, has worked successfully in the relatively short time he has been in post to raise staff morale and improve teamwork. Teaching staff report that they now feel more responsible as a whole group for improving the school and that they understand the importance of working more closely together. Subject coordinators for English, mathematics and science are increasingly enthusiastic and keen to bring about improvement. However, the overall management structure of the school including, crucially, the delegation of workable responsibilities, such as the coordination of English, mathematics, science and assessment has not yet been tackled. This hampers severely the effectiveness of monitoring and the development of many pressing priorities, not least raising achievement. Procedures for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning have been introduced. Teaching in every class has been observed and feedback given to staff. However, it is too early for this to impact fully on tackling the inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning. The effective use of assessment data to monitor the overall effectiveness of the school and inform the school's self-evaluation is being improved, but is at too early a stage to give leaders an accurate view of the school's overall effectiveness and an accurate picture of pupils' progress and achievement. The school is unable to say with certainty, how accurate many of the assessment outcomes are. Consequently, assessment is not being developed fast enough to enable the school to track the progress and achievement of different groups of pupils accurately. This robs the school of an effective tool for monitoring its effectiveness and the impact it is having on improving its equality of opportunity for pupils of differing abilities and backgrounds.

The school's raising attainment plan identifies priorities for improvement based on the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection report. The plan provides a useful and comprehensive strategy for guiding future improvement, although its implementation is at a very early stage. Many of the school's policies are being re-written to make them more meaningful as working documents for staff. The writing of new policies now involves staff wherever possible. Teachers say that their sense of ownership has risen as a result. The effective monitoring of how effectively these policies are being implemented has yet to take place systematically.

The quality and accuracy of information provided to governors is improving, much to governors' relief and appreciation. Governors have received training on how to interpret data relating to the school's effectiveness. They now have much more confidence in being able to accurately judge how well the school is doing and, importantly, they are becoming more confident in asking the necessary questions to hold the school to account.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve the quality of self evaluation - inadequate
- improve the equality of opportunity for all pupils - inadequate

External support

The local authority statement of action meets requirements. The target date for the removal of the school from special measures given as December 2010 is unrealistic, however. The local authority conducted two school reviews in March and April 2010. These have helped the school to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning, especially in the teaching of English. However, less practical advice and support has been offered in developing effective leadership and management of the school. Good guidance and support from the local authority literacy consultants is helping to raise achievement in English, especially in writing.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop the management structure of the school so that responsibilities delegated to members of staff are manageable and have the necessary impact on improving achievement.