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Mrs Naomi Walsh
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Walsh

Collaborative Restart: Monitoring Inspection of Finlay Community School

Introduction

Following my visit with David Westall, Additional Inspector, to your school on 25 and 26 May, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) to confirm the inspection findings.

This visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school opened in January 2009.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, staff, the Chair of the Governing Body, and a group of pupils. They talked with pupils in lessons and break times and looked at samples of their work.

Context

The school opened in January 2009 on the same site as the predecessor school of the same name. It opened under the New School Competition process and is supported by the Learning Community Partnership comprising the University of Gloucestershire, GL Communities, and a number of churches in the Gloucester City Deanery.

The number of pupils on roll has increased from 148 on opening to 177. About 80% of pupils are White British and others are from a wide range of heritages.

The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals, at roughly 40%, is well above the national average. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above average, as is the proportion with a statement of special educational needs. The main difficulties or disabilities are behavioural, emotional or social, or in speech, language and communication.

The school shares its site with a children's centre. On the site there was also an adult learning facility; this closed recently and the school has plans to develop the building for family learning. The school runs a breakfast club. Four teachers and one teaching assistant joined the school since January 2009. All other staff transferred from the predecessor school. The headteacher was permanently appointed in the week before this inspection, having led the school as acting headteacher from September 2009. She was previously the acting deputy headteacher and also the Year 6 teacher.

Achievement and standards

The school is successfully raising achievement and standards because leaders and managers have set high aspirations and are taking a very determined stance in seeking to ensure that all pupils make the progress they are capable of.

The school's results in the Year 2 national tests in 2009 were broadly in line with national averages. Similarly, in the end of Year 6 national tests, results in 2009 were in line with national averages. The school's Year 6 results showed pupils made excellent progress given their starting points in Year 3. In the main, the best progress was made by pupils who started Year 3 with attainment below expected levels for their ages, and by those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. In 2009, a lower than average proportion of pupils attained above expected levels. The school is aware that there is still work to be done to speed up the progress of the more able pupils.

The school's records of attainment for pupils currently in Year 6, and their work, show that the 2010 test results are likely to be similar to those in 2009. Given pupils' slightly higher starting points, progress from Year 2 may not be as good as that seen in 2009. Nevertheless, pupils' progress throughout the school is being speeded up because a careful check is kept on it and because provision is being fine-tuned to more closely meet pupils' individual needs.

In the Reception class, children's attainment is below what is typically expected for their ages by the end of the year in communication, language and literacy, but their progress is nevertheless good from their generally low starting points. Children learn to interact happily with each other and greatly enjoy both the activities they choose and those they do as a whole group, in story time, for example. During the inspection, much fun was had preparing for the 'Superheroes' party.

The school's focus on improving pupils' skills in writing is bearing fruit. Samples of work examined included pieces of writing for a wide range of purposes and in varied styles or contexts, often linked to the theme being studied. Writing skills are being fostered securely although there are too many weaknesses in handwriting. In mathematics, pupils are making reasonable progress but, too often, skills are learned out of context and without the support of tangible objects or visual explanations. Pupils know their targets for learning and can talk about them, not just in terms of the numerical levels they are aiming for, but also in terms of what specifically they need to do and develop.

Personal development and well-being

The school is a happy, calm and harmonious community. Behaviour is good, although concentration drifts occasionally when teaching or tasks lack interest. Pupils are keen to please and are friendly to visitors. They are proud of their work and were particularly eager to show inspectors their 'theme' books and talk about the trips and clubs they enjoy. Attendance has improved but is still only broadly average, mainly because some families take their children on holiday during term time. Many activities provided by the school support pupils in developing a good understanding of how to lead safe and healthy lives. Pupils respond positively when given responsibilities, such as acting as 'play partners' or as members of the school council.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are undertaken calmly and in pleasant, orderly classrooms much enhanced with good displays. Teaching is mostly satisfactory or good; it is sometimes outstanding. There are, however, relative shortcomings in some teachers' subject knowledge or teaching skills in mathematics, and also in their skill in providing challenge for the more able pupils. There is a wide spread of ability in each class and lesson planning usually caters for the needs of most pupils. In some lessons, pupils do work that is already well within their grasp. Teaching assistants are attentive to pupils' emotional and learning needs and work in good partnership with class teachers to support pupils' learning. In the best lessons seen, teachers and teaching assistants showed skill in identifying those pupils who needed extra help and giving it to them, often through supportive questioning and encouragement. Marking is generally good; it makes reference to pupils' targets and checks that pupils have responded in subsequent work to comments previously made. Teachers are aware of their pupils' attainment at the start of the academic year and of what can be expected of them by the end of it. They are not always aware of any previous underachievement that needs to be addressed.

There are many good features in the curriculum. The themed approach to subjects such as history, geography, science and religious education is enjoyed by pupils, and also by staff. It makes learning fun, exciting and relevant. The provision for literacy also has many positive features, in both the materials

used and in teachers' understanding of how to present them. Children in the Reception class benefit from a good learning environment with much space and interesting areas and resources; plans exist to enhance these further. Resources for information and communication technology are good, as is the library. Much is done to support pupils' personal development, formally in lessons but also informally and unobtrusively in the many positive individual interactions staff have with pupils. The school has established high expectations of pupils' behaviour and pupils are clear about them. The headteacher, in particular, plays an important part in helping individual pupils manage their behaviour at times of stress or difficulty. The breakfast club is organised well and provides a good start to the day for those pupils who attend; a warm family feel prevails in it. Pupils' well-being is given a very high priority. Safeguarding arrangements are good.

Leadership and management

The vision and drive of the headteacher and the Chair of the Governing Body and that of other staff and governors have been hugely instrumental in raising standards and achievement. Staff are rightly proud of what they have achieved together in transforming the school for the better. The school has good capacity to sustain further improvements.

The headteacher is held in high esteem by staff. Staff share the desire to improve the school and can see what needs to be done. Work on developing teaching and learning is particularly strong. Subject leadership has positive features visible in the thoughtful evaluations undertaken through a good range of strategies including lesson observations and scrutinies of pupils' work. There is currently no deputy or assistant headteacher; plans are in place to strengthen the leadership team so that the headteacher can share the responsibilities she currently has to manage. Leadership of the Early Years Foundation Stage is good.

The school development plan is ambitious for the school and community. It states clearly as one of its aims 'to inspire and motivate children to have aspirations'. Appropriate success criteria are given but they do not place enough emphasis on outcomes for pupils. Self-evaluation is mostly accurate. The governing body is becoming increasingly adept at holding the school to account for the outcomes it achieves. The headteacher and assessment coordinator keep good records of pupils' attainment. The systems used, while useful in many ways, do not currently allow for speedy analysis of the progress of groups of pupils, for example.

External support

The school benefits greatly from the backing of the University of Gloucestershire as well as from its other two main supporters in the Learning Community Partnership. The school's partnership with the initial teacher training department of the university is strong and of mutual benefit, enriching

the learning and development of both school staff and university students, as well as enhancing the curriculum in areas such as sport. The local churches and community groups play a valuable part in working with pupils and their families to support learning and community cohesion in the locality. School leaders and managers value the work of officers and advisers from the local authority and the support of the Gloucestershire Schools Partnership. They appreciate the support of the Education Welfare Officer and Education Welfare Service as a whole. The School Improvement Partner offers a useful blend of support and challenge.

Main Judgements

The school's overall progress is good.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve standards, particular in writing (including handwriting) and mathematics; increase the proportion of pupils reaching above expected levels in English and mathematics.
- Ensure that the more able pupils are challenged appropriately in all lessons through the tasks set and pertinent questioning.
- Strengthen leadership and management so that the headteacher can share responsibility more widely.
- Develop further the school's systems for assessment so that the progress of groups of pupils as well as of individuals can be easily determined, and to spot and avert quickly any possible underachievement.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Director of Children and Young People's Service for Gloucestershire.

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
Her Majesty's Inspector