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Miss Alexandra Butler
Headteacher
The Willows Primary School
Pyle Hill
Newbury
RG14 7SJ

Dear Miss Butler

Special measures: monitoring inspection of The Willows Primary School

Following my visit (with Barbara Atcheson, Additional Inspector) to your school on 29 and 30 September 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is set out in the annex to this letter. 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 be appointed. (This may be to any year group, but there should be no more than one appointment in the first instance.)

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 governing body and the director of Children's Services for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2010

- Speed up pupils progress and hence raise their levels of attainment in all classes by:
 - ensuring teachers understand and articulate what can be expected of pupils, given their accurately evaluated starting points from entering the school, from the start of a school year, or at the start of a topic
 - ensuring that the tasks and activities set for pupils in lessons match their needs and that learning moves at a swift pace.
- Develop further the school's curriculum by:
 - ensuring that provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or difficulties is properly planned, organised and evaluated
 - completing the work started on designing and implementing a curriculum that supports the development of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding across all areas as required, and enables them to enjoy their learning.
- Improve aspects of care, guidance and support by:
 - strengthening the school's effectiveness in enabling pupils to behave well at all times
 - working further to improve pupils' overall attendance and reduce the numbers of pupils who are persistent absentees
 - working systematically with those pupils whose circumstances makes them vulnerable so they engage fully in their learning and enjoy it.
- Secure the leadership and management of the school by:
 - as a matter of urgency, establishing a permanent and effective senior leadership team
 - developing the roles and skills of the leadership team and middle managers
 - improving the effectiveness of governance.

Special measures: monitoring of The Willows Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 29 and 30 September 2010

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, members of staff, pupils, the School Improvement Partner and representatives of the school improvement board.

Context

At the time of the last inspection, the school's current headteacher was working in an acting capacity, on partial secondment from another school in the local authority. Her position has now been made permanent and she works as an executive headteacher across both schools, typically spending three days a week at The Willows. At the time of the inspection there had also been a long-term vacancy for a teacher to coordinate the school's provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities; this post has now been filled. A new deputy headteacher took up post at the start of this term.

In June 2010 the responsibilities of the governing body were temporarily transferred to a school improvement board, a body set up by the local authority.

At the time of the last inspection, there were large differences in class sizes. This problem has been resolved by creating mixed classes, each containing pupils from two year groups.

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

The provisional results of the national tests taken by pupils at the end of Key Stage 2 in 2010 indicate that the attainment of these pupils was low and that they did not make expected progress as they moved from Key Stage 1 to 2. Teacher-assessed levels for these pupils are slightly higher, although still low. Although pupils' attainment in the Key Stage 1 assessments was also low, a higher proportion attained Level 2 in reading, writing and mathematics than in 2009.

Very good work has been done to improve the way in which the school tracks pupils' achievement; assessments are now much more accurate. As a result, when the school's Key Stage 1 assessments were moderated by the local authority last term, they were upheld as accurate and no changes were made; this has not been the case in recent years. Staff now have detailed, accurate and reliable benchmarks against which to track pupils' progress from now on – a significant step forward.

The school's tracking data show a very variable picture: in many cases, pupils did not make the progress expected of them last year and there is a significant history of low attainment across the school. However, pupils are increasingly achieving more in lessons. Pupils were making at least satisfactory progress in the vast majority of lessons observed during the inspection; they were making good progress in around a third of lessons observed. Most pupils are now keen and willing learners. They listen well to the teacher and they have positive attitudes to school and to learning. Most persevere very well when things get difficult, although some lack the confidence to work well on their own.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- speed up pupils' progress and hence raise their levels of attainment in all classes – satisfactory.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Behaviour has improved significantly. Inspectors found pupils to be well behaved, friendly and courteous. No incidents of misbehaviour were observed during the inspection. Pupils told inspectors that, while misbehaviour does sometimes disturb their learning, this is now much less common. Although absence is still a significant problem, the school's data indicate that attendance is rising and that a decreasing number of pupils are persistently absent.

The effectiveness of provision

The very large majority of teaching seen during the inspection was at least satisfactory; teaching was good in a small minority of lessons. Teachers have positive and constructive relationships with their pupils and they manage their classes well. In good lessons, teachers maintain a swift pace of learning, with activities carefully selected and planned to interest, enthuse and challenge pupils. Less-effective teaching typically has one or more of the following weaknesses:

- A slow pace to the lesson, often caused by ponderous or lengthy questioning by the teacher, or a lack of clarity about what pupils need to achieve (and how long they have to achieve it).
- Inappropriate levels of challenge for pupils of different ability, so that work is too easy for some pupils and too hard for others.
- Weaknesses in planning, so that the lesson's activities do not interest or motivate pupils.

Satisfactory progress has been made in developing the curriculum. Aspects of the curriculum are now taught in a more integrated way, with work developed around a central theme or topic, but incorporating aspects of a range of subjects. This is helping to enrich and enhance the curriculum, for example by supporting more

opportunities for pupils to undertake educational visits. However, the quality of planning for the integrated curriculum is variable and does not always result in interesting and engaging learning experiences for the pupils.

The school's provision for care, guidance and support has improved considerably. Staff work systematically to ensure that pupils who face particular challenges – for example, those who arrive during the school year – are supported well. Much good work is being done to improve and strengthen the school's relationships with parents and carers. Procedures for behaviour management have been tightened and pupils are now very clear about the school's high expectations of their behaviour. Procedures for managing attendance and for encouraging pupils to attend regularly have also improved.

The successful recruitment of a coordinator has helped to improve the provision for pupils with special educational needs. In the lessons observed during the inspection, these pupils were making similar progress to others. The effective deployment of teaching assistants, a significant weakness at the time of the last inspection, has improved greatly: they now play a much more consistently useful role in supporting and promoting pupils' learning. However, teaching assistants working with small groups in lessons occasionally over-dominate activities, reducing opportunities for pupils to work more independently.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- develop further the school's curriculum – satisfactory
- improve aspects of care, guidance and support – good.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The school is led by a very effective executive headteacher. After a period of negotiation, the headteacher's working arrangements across the two schools have been established. Although the school's senior leadership capacity is still quite stretched, it has strengthened significantly, in part because much less time is now spent dealing with poor behaviour. Senior leaders have an accurate and realistic understanding of the school's weaknesses and they are ambitious for further improvement.

At the time of the last inspection, the school did not have a strong tier of middle leaders. Since then, the school's leadership structure has been reviewed and revised, and the responsibilities of individual leaders have been clarified. A range of sensible work is planned for this term to embed these changes, and to develop the roles and strengthen the skills of middle leaders. As part of this, each middle leader is preparing a detailed plan for their area of responsibility to indicate the contribution that they will make to the school's overall targets for improvement – a useful development. The school's wider leadership capacity is strengthening, although

much yet needs to be done to ensure that leaders across the school are able to play a full and concerted role in the school's improvement.

In the last few months, the responsibilities of the governing body have been temporarily transferred to a school improvement board. The intention is that the governors will be trained, enabling them to resume their duties once the school has been removed from special measures. There has been an audit of the skills of individual governors, although no specific training has, as yet, taken place.

Progress since the last section 5 inspection on the areas for improvement:

- secure the leadership and management of the school – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority was asked to amend its statement of action for the school, as it did not include sufficiently clear and quantifiable success criteria. Amendments have now been made and the plan has been improved, although further changes are planned in response to adjustments to the school's own plans and targets.

During its time as a Fresh Start school, the school received a considerable amount of support from the local authority. The executive headteacher has worked with local authority officers to rationalise this support, ensuring that it has a more tangible and long-term impact. As part of its support, the local authority has seconded one of its consultants to the school for two days per week. This has been particularly valuable: it has increased the school's leadership capacity in the absence of a deputy headteacher and has helped the school to improve the quality and accuracy of its assessment processes.

The school improvement board has been set up by the local authority to provide intensive support and challenge to the school's leaders. The board's members bring a wide range of skills and experience. However, as the group only formed in June, it is too early to make a judgement on its impact.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that learning in all lessons moves at a swift pace and that all teachers plan activities that interest, motivate and challenge pupils of different abilities.