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Mrs Veronica Shaw
Acting Headteacher
Merdon Junior School
Merdon Avenue
Chandler's Ford
Eastleigh
SO53 1EJ

Dear Mrs Shaw

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Merdon Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 21 and 22 November 2012, 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection that took place in January 2012. 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

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

One newly qualified teacher may be appointed, on the condition that mentoring support is provided by the acting headteacher's school: Scantabout Primary.

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 Hampshire.

Yours sincerely

Gehane Gordelier
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2012

- Raise attainment in writing so that it matches that in reading and ensure pupils meet the levels expected for their age by:
 - using assessment information to plan lessons that are well matched to all pupils' abilities, particularly the most able
 - regularly reminding pupils of their individual targets, as well as those for the whole lesson
 - developing teachers' marking so pupils understand exactly what to do to improve their work and know the next steps in their learning
 - providing greater opportunities for pupils to practise the skills they have learned in literacy lessons when writing in other subjects.

- Ensure pupils make at least the expected progress in English and mathematics by:
 - raising teachers' expectations of what all pupils should be able to achieve
 - maintaining sufficient pace and challenge in lessons
 - checking pupils' progress regularly throughout the year so that underachieving pupils are identified quickly
 - intervening promptly in order to target support more effectively, especially for those pupils who are falling behind.

- Improve leaders' systematic monitoring and evaluation of the actions the school takes to remedy areas of weakness by:
 - ensuring improvement plans include rigorous measures of progress, tight deadlines and precise measures of success so that leaders can judge the progress the school is making
 - using assessment information effectively to set challenging targets for pupils' progress, eradicate underachievement and enable pupils to make good progress and achieve well.

Special measures: monitoring of Merdon Junior School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 19–20 June 2012

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and checked the school's single central record. Meetings were held with senior leaders, teachers, support staff, a group of pupils, a group of parents and carers, the Chair of the Governing Body and the District Manager from the local authority. The inspector observed eight lessons alongside either the headteacher or the deputy headteacher. One assembly was also seen.

Context

The former headteacher retired at the end of summer 2012. The local authority appointed an acting headteacher to work at Merdon Juniors from September 2012 until April 2013. The acting headteacher is the headteacher of a local primary school which was judged as outstanding by Ofsted in June 2009. The acting headteacher works at Merdon Juniors four days a week; the deputy headteacher at Merdon Juniors provides cover in her absence. There have been significant changes to the membership of the governing body. Four governors have left and three new governors have been appointed. The position of teacher governor has become vacant. In September 2012, the governing body elected a new Chair of the Governing Body and vice-chair.

A new District Manager from the local authority has been allocated to the school; however, this is currently on a temporary basis.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The school did not meet its targets for the proportion of pupils who made at least expected progress in English and mathematics by the end of Year 6 in 2012. However, standards rose and were higher than they have been since 2010. Pupils made better progress in mathematics than in English. The pupils who made the least amount of progress were those who started Year 3 having reached the higher Level 3 at the end of Key Stage 1.

The school now collects and analyses information about pupils' standards in English and mathematics in greater detail. This helps leaders, managers and teachers to set targets for pupils that are appropriate and are aimed at raising levels of attainment. Parents and carers and pupils welcome the use of targets as they help pupils to know what to aim for. Standards in mathematics and writing are now rising throughout the school. Gaps in attainment between different groups of pupils are

reducing. This is particularly the case in mathematics because pupils are starting to use their mathematical skills more confidently. The best progress currently being made in writing is in Year 6; the slowest rate of progress is in Year 3. Pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium (additional government funding) are progressing as well as their peers across the school. However, due to underachievement in previous years they are behind other pupils in Year 6 in reading, writing and mathematics. Disabled pupils and those with special educational needs are making the same amount of progress as their peers. A few parents and carers who have children with additional needs told the inspector that they were pleased with the support they receive from the school; however, some parents and carers told the inspector that they were not, and that they pay for additional tuition for their children outside of school to help their children to progress well.

Although standards of reading are generally high across the school, there is not always sufficient support for pupils of lower ability during class-based lessons to help with their reading. There is also not always enough challenge for the more-able pupils to develop their skills in reading, particularly lower down the school.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Raise attainment in writing so that it matches that in reading and ensure pupils meet the levels expected for their age – satisfactory
- Ensure pupils make at least the expected progress in English and mathematics – satisfactory

The quality of teaching

The school and local authority's evaluations about the quality of teaching present a more positive picture than the teaching observed during this inspection. The quality of teaching in Year 6 is however consistently good. In the rest of the school, much of the teaching requires improvement, and some weaknesses remain. This highlights the fact that important features of good teaching in English and mathematics are still not well embedded in teachers' daily practice.

Teachers make better use of information about pupils' levels of attainment to raise their expectations of what pupils can achieve. With the exception of guided reading, for which expectations are at times too low, most lessons are well planned. This is because planning now takes better account of pupils' needs and differing abilities. Teachers plan activities to challenge their more-able pupils. However, these activities do not always extend learning and levels of challenge are not introduced early enough during lessons. More teachers now remind pupils to refer to their targets during lessons and this helps pupils to take greater responsibility for their learning.

Most teachers ask questions that help pupils to think and give good reasons for their answers.

Teachers actively seek opportunities for pupils to write in other subjects. They use visual aids to engage and motivate pupils, as well as some practical resources to support their learning. Teaching assistants support a wider range of pupils. They appreciate the clear guidance from teachers that helps them to be more effective, especially with those pupils who need extra support.

Despite the improvements made to teachers' planning, some common weaknesses in teaching remain. Teachers do not always have on display the explanation of what pupils are expected to learn during lessons, including new technical vocabulary. This slows the rate of progress made by those pupils who benefit from having this information as a visual reminder. Too few teachers check pupils' understanding and progress during lessons. This reduces their ability to identify those pupils who are either in need of additional support or who are ready for more challenge. All too often, this results in a slower pace of learning than is necessary. Mathematics lessons are usually not taught within a meaningful context. This results in pupils not understanding the value or purpose of what they are learning. Pupils told the inspector that some of their teachers still spend too much time talking, and this reduces the time they have left to get on and finish their work. They also commented on how unhelpful they find the interruptions during mathematics and English lessons when pupils return from music lessons. They noted that additional time to their own learning is lost when teachers then spend time repeating information that has already been shared with the class. Teachers told the inspector that while this situation is much better than it was, it is still not fully resolved.

The quality of teachers' marking in English and mathematics has significantly improved. Pupils now understand what they have to do to improve their work. They are also taking more responsibility for assessing and improving their own work. However, marking in other subjects, except for in science where it is usually done well, is very variable and at times weak.

Most teachers now make better use of homework to help pupils to practise their basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics at home. However, parents and carers are not fully aware of the school's homework policy or the different strategies used to teach some subjects, such as aspects of mathematics. Parents and carers have mixed views about the use of homework. Although a few parents and carers report that their children receive homework regularly and that teachers mark this work well, this is not the case for all classes.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils feel safe in school. They enjoy coming to school as demonstrated by their high levels of attendance. Pupils understand the different forms that bullying can

take and the need to respect and value each other's differences. Good assemblies encourage pupils to become peacemakers and to learn how to resolve conflict. When behaviour is less than good, it is generally because teaching fails to engage pupils' interests, or pupils become frustrated because they do not understand what they have to do.

The quality of leadership and management of the school

The acting headteacher and deputy headteacher have gained the confidence of staff and have stabilised the situation at the school. Staff feel valued and well supported during this difficult time of change, especially as a new headteacher has yet to be appointed. The acting headteacher and deputy headteacher make good use of information about pupils' progress to challenge underperformance and identify those pupils in need of additional support. This is already leading to a reduction in the proportion of pupils who underachieve. However, they have yet to compare the progress made by different classes within the same year group and the achievement of pupils of different ability. The mathematics and science leaders are developing their roles well.

There is now regular and more rigorous monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning. The deputy headteacher is particularly astute at identifying strengths and weaknesses in teaching. However, the school's records of lessons observed do not record the value added to pupils' learning and do not focus enough on the progress made by different groups of pupils. Nevertheless, staff appreciate the timely and quality feedback they receive about their practice and say this is helping them to improve.

School self-evaluation is not sufficiently thorough. As a result, important weaknesses are not identified, and judgements about the school's performance are at times over generous. Improvement plans for the whole school as well as for subjects lack detail. This limits the ability of leaders, managers and governors to measure progress precisely. Some timescales are too open and there is not enough information about key aspects of the school's work that need to get better quickly. This includes the actions to be taken to improve teaching and information about what is required in individual education plans. This, together with some key leadership and management roles still being underdeveloped, is compromising the school's ability to build the capacity to sustain improvement. Senior leaders recognise that the senior leadership team, and particularly the leadership and management of English and special educational needs, needs to be reorganised to ensure the school is best placed to make rapid progress.

Many governors are new to the role and will need to get up to speed very quickly to help the school to continue to progress. The governing body has yet to ensure it meets all its statutory duties, for example in terms of monitoring and evaluating the impact of the school's equality of opportunity policy.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Improve leaders' systematic monitoring and evaluation of the actions the school takes to remedy areas of weakness – satisfactory

External support

The quality and impact of the external support provided to the school have been satisfactory overall. This has helped to improve relationships between staff and the school's leaders. Pockets of good support include that provided by the Primary Phase Inspectors. This has helped the school to develop and improve the way it tracks the progress made by pupils. Guidance for staff from Primary Phase Inspectors has helped them to improve the quality of planning in English and mathematics, and has also supported the leadership of English, mathematics and science. The local authority's helpful reviews clearly identify what needs to improve within the leadership of special educational needs, English and mathematics. However, there has not been enough focus on the learning and progress of different groups of pupils.

The targets in the original statement of action have proved overambitious. As it stands, this document is no longer as helpful as it should be to help the school in planning for improvement.

The delay in advertising for a new headteacher has proved unsettling for parents and carers and staff. Nevertheless, the local authority has done well to secure the services of a highly experienced acting headteacher. The Primary Phase Inspector and District Manager also provide effective support.