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26 April 2013

Mrs Jane Ireland
Acting Headteacher
Marshlands Primary School
Marshfoot Lane
Hailsham
BN27 2PH

Dear Mrs Ireland

Special measures monitoring inspection of Marshlands Primary School

Following my visit with Vic Chaffey, additional inspector, and Sue Street, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your school on 24–25 April 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection in October 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is not making enough progress towards the removal of special measures.

Newly qualified teachers should not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published 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 Director of Children's Services for East Sussex.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Dickinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

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

- By following the other improvement recommendations below, and as a matter of urgency, raise pupils' attainment in English and mathematics so that:
 - the school meets at least the floor standard for pupils' progress
 - standards in Key Stages 1 and 2 rise considerably and quickly
 - pupils in all year groups regularly meet challenging milestones, working towards these overall targets to overcome the current backlog of underachievement.

- Improve teaching significantly, so that it is consistently good and better by:
 - raising considerably the expectations of staff about what pupils can and should achieve
 - ensuring teachers set challenging tasks for pupils, based on assessments of their needs and precisely what they need to learn next
 - ensuring teachers use good questioning of pupils consistently to enhance and draw out their thinking
 - making whole-class teaching sharper so that pupils spend less time listening to the teacher and more time engaging in demanding tasks
 - using staff performance management more robustly to hold teachers to account and support them in targeting and bringing about improvement
 - ensuring that pupils have consistent, well-organised opportunities to read widely.

- Sharpen considerably school self-evaluation so that, in particular, the quality of teaching is robustly and accurately evaluated, and that the school is clear about how well all pupils are progressing as individuals and groups.

- Ensure the effectiveness of the school improvement planning by:
 - identifying clear targets and milestones for pupils' progress and attainment, for all cohorts and groups
 - including within the plan actions which are designed to achieve the milestones, and show how these actions are rigorously and regularly monitored and evaluated
 - ensuring that the pupil premium funding is carefully targeted and that the impact of this expenditure on outcomes for the pupils concerned is robustly checked.

- Improve quickly and radically the leadership, management and governance by:
 - ensuring senior leaders clearly and consistently raise expectations amongst the staff and demonstrate the skills needed to bring about improvement
 - providing support and challenge for staff as needed

- planning strategically and evaluating the school's work and its impact very carefully
- allowing middle leaders to take more responsibility for the provision and standards in their areas, being clear about what is expected of them, and ensuring they are well supported and held accountable for the impact of their work
- immediately undertaking a review of governance and ensure that governors have high expectations of the school, can hold school leaders properly to account and show the skills necessary to undertake the tasks of governance.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 24–25 April 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and held meetings with the acting headteacher, consultant headteacher, acting deputy headteacher, Chair of the Interim Executive Board and a representative from the local authority. The main focus on this visit was teaching in English, particularly writing, and mathematics. Lessons were observed in all years apart from the Nursery, with some teachers observed on more than one occasion. Inspectors examined pupils' writing and mathematics work since October 2012 and spoke to pupils informally about their learning.

Context

The headteacher, deputy headteacher and another teacher left the school at the end of March. An acting headteacher has led the school for just over a week and the consultant headteacher started three days prior to the visit. The teacher responsible for special educational needs and mathematics has taken on the role of acting deputy headteacher on a temporary basis. From June, a teacher from another school has been seconded to take up this position. A teacher has been seconded from another school to teach in the Reception class for three days a week, from this term. Some classes have been taught by several different teachers since the last monitoring inspection, most of whom have been supply teachers. The interim executive board is continuing to explore options for the school becoming a sponsored academy.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils' progress in English and mathematics has been too slow since the school's inspection last October. Teachers' judgements on each pupil's attainment in reading, writing and mathematics have not been checked thoroughly, to make sure they are totally reliable. The work pupils are given is not at the right level for their particular needs, to fill the gaps in their learning quickly. As a result, pupils are not yet making up enough ground in writing and mathematics to help them catch-up with where they should be. When inspectors asked pupils if they knew their levels in writing or mathematics, they were sometimes quoting lower levels than their work suggested but, more often, these were much higher. There is often a mismatch between the teachers' judgements about each pupil's attainment and the levels demonstrated in lessons and in pupils' books.

Supply teachers and the teachers who have taken on class-teaching from different roles do not know enough about pupils' capabilities and the weaknesses in the pupils' skills and understanding. As a consequence, some work that is planned for pupils, in both English and mathematics, is too hard but, more often, it is too easy.

This was the case at the last inspection. Teachers in Key Stage 1 have a better knowledge of their pupils, having taught them for longer. These teachers have had more training from the local authority's consultants to help them plan work that is at the appropriate level. There are some early signs from books that pupils' progress is beginning to pick up in Key Stage 1, in writing and mathematics. However, there is not yet enough evidence that pupils' progress is picking up as quickly as it needs to, given that the school is six months on from its inspection.

There is a very long way to go before pupils' learning and progress improves to an acceptable standard in Key Stage 2. Pupils' learning in this key stage remains a significant weakness. The pupils say that all the changes of teacher have been difficult for them. The continuity in their learning has certainly been affected. It is clear, from pupils' books, that some teachers have had higher expectations of what the pupils can achieve than others. In the mixed Year 5 and 6 class, for example, the standard of pupils' most recent writing is worse than it was in February. All pupils in this class are still writing using pencils, rather than pens, which is inappropriate. They are not being encouraged on a consistent basis to aim high, work hard and do their best. The school's leaders have been slow to counteract the legacy of underachievement for the pupils in Year 6. The last inspection report commented on how poorly these pupils had been prepared for their secondary education. From the evidence in pupils' books, this looks as though it is likely to be the case again this year.

The quality of teaching

More is now being expected of pupils lower down the school where teachers have a better knowledge of pupils' needs. A good lesson in a mixed Year 1 and 2 class saw pupils working at a level that was right for each group. These pupils worked hard and pushed themselves to succeed. Sometimes, teachers' keenness to challenge the pupils leads them to plan work that is too difficult for many. This happened in a mathematics lesson in Year 1, but the teacher immediately adapted the plans for the following day and the pupils coped much more successfully.

Teachers still have a tendency to talk too much, especially at the beginning of lessons, and pupils have to do a lot of listening. Teaching in English and mathematics remains too directed in many cases, by both teachers and teaching assistants, which limits opportunities for pupils to make their own decisions and work things out for themselves. On occasions, teachers interrupt pupils once they are under way with their writing. The teachers' questions are not always well timed or purposeful and only serve to interrupt pupils' train of thought and slow down their rate of work. When teachers talk for much of the time, it cuts down opportunities for pupils to develop their speaking skills. Pupils are sometimes interrupted before they have finished speaking, and there is still too little focus on developing pupils' own talk and modelling back grammatically correct spoken language. In contrast, some teachers are now using questioning techniques more successfully, more so in

mathematics than English lessons. For example, a teacher gave a pupil in Year 1 plenty of time to think when he was asked how he worked out that 2 more than 7 would be 9.

There are isolated examples of teaching assistants working successfully, with small groups of pupils. A few lessons were observed where the teaching assistant was very clear about what they should be teaching and what the pupils should learn. Some teaching assistants are very good at supporting learning and are an asset to the teacher and pupils. Others are too preoccupied with managing pupils' behaviour, sometimes stepping in unnecessarily, rather than encouraging and helping to create a lively and positive atmosphere for learning.

The senior leaders have not improved the way early reading is taught, especially the teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make). The teaching groups in Years 1 and 2 are too large for pupils to make swift progress and for teachers to check that each pupil is reading and writing accurately. Some of the resources are confusing for both teachers and pupils. Not all teachers and teaching assistants pronounce sounds with precision so that pupils can distinguish the difference. The most effective phonics teaching was seen in the Reception class. Here, the teacher made sure there was good eye contact with the small group of children and the session was sharply focused on two different sounds that were written in the same way. By the end, all the children were using what they had learnt about these sounds to spell simple, relevant words correctly.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils in most classes settle well to their tasks and respond to the teachers' questions and directions. In the classes where they are expected to discuss ideas or answers with a partner from time to time, they respond positively and are keen to share their thoughts. Some pupils become less interested when they are not involved in the lesson, for example when the teacher asks only the pupils with their hands up, or those who call out. In several lessons, where teaching was inadequate, pupils remained well behaved and tried hard. This was also the case in an assembly on Shakespeare, where the teacher's explanation, and an associated video clip, used language that was too difficult for many of the pupils to understand. There are two classes in Key Stage 2 where pupils' attitudes are more unsettled.

At the school's inspection, attendance rates were consistently below average. Since that time, attendance has deteriorated. The school's leaders have not tackled this effectively in order to make sure pupils who miss a lot of school attend regularly.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The school has not improved enough since the last inspection or the monitoring visit in February. A clear strategic view and plan, to drive the school's improvement, has

been lacking. Consequently, the school is not where it needs to be in relation to all five areas for improvement from the original inspection. Governance has improved significantly, through the appointment of an interim executive board. Members of the board have been clear as to the information they required from the headteacher, especially relating to pupils' achievement. This information, to date, has not been forthcoming in a clear, usable format, making it difficult for members to judge whether pupils' progress is picking up as it should. Some inadequate teaching has been tackled but not yet eliminated. Inadequate teaching was observed on this visit and pupils' books show slower rates of learning, day by day, than should be the case, particularly in Key Stage 2. The interim executive board and local authority are working together to strengthen the quality of teaching from September. The weaknesses in assessment will need to be sorted out urgently so that all teachers can pitch lessons at the correct level to help pupils make good progress on a consistent basis.

The consultant headteacher and acting headteacher both have experience of supporting schools in special measures. Both know that the school needs to improve rapidly from now on. An early start has been made on reviewing the school's policies for teaching and behaviour so that staff are entirely clear of what is expected for both areas. Several teachers spoke to inspectors saying they very much wanted the school to improve and to work with the new leadership team.

At the time of the inspection, the school's plan for improvement was criticised for being 'unclear and imprecise'. This continues to be the case. The many weaknesses, identified on the first monitoring inspection, have not been put right. Despite some amendments, the plan still does not provide a firm foundation for the school's rapid improvement that can be easily followed, monitored or evaluated. The consultant headteacher has been charged with reviewing this plan as a matter of urgency and will submit this to Her Majesty's Inspector, for review, within the coming weeks.

External support

The school has received a lot of support from consultants with around 40 half- or whole-day visits occurring since the original inspection. These have mainly been focused on English and mathematics. The programme of support has had a limited impact on improving the quality of teaching and pupils' achievement in these subjects. The many changes in teaching staff, especially in Key Stage 2, have not helped. However, an important factor is the lack of a strategic improvement plan to make sure that this support is focused on the most pressing priorities and that it is thoroughly checked and evaluated. The local authority has several representatives on the interim executive board and is ensuring that the school's finances are spent wisely, specifically to strengthen the quality of teaching. The local authority's representation on the board is also helping to guide discussions on possible academy status for the school.