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Vivienne Bunce
Headteacher
Stow Heath Primary School
Hill Road
Willenhall
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Dear Miss Bunce

Special measures monitoring inspection of Stow Heath Primary School

Following my visit with Rowena Green, Additional Inspector, to your school on 2–3 July 2014, 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 which took place in December 2013. 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 making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The school may appoint one newly qualified teacher before the next monitoring inspection if guidance and support is provided by a teacher whose quality of teaching is consistently good or better.

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 Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Wolverhampton.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Howie
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2013

- Improve teaching so pupils make better progress in reading, writing and mathematics by making sure that:
 - work is always matched to pupils' differing ability levels, so that it builds on what they already know and are able to do
 - the pace of all lessons is brisk enough to engage all pupils
 - teachers pick up and correct errors and misconceptions as they occur in lessons and in pupils' work
 - teachers use probing questions to extend and develop pupils' thinking
 - pupils develop the skills needed to become independent in their learning
 - teachers' marking in books tells pupils how to improve their work and gives them the opportunity to respond to the comments made.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - increasing the frequency and rigour of checks made on teaching and learning and use the information about pupils' progress to hold teachers to account
 - setting higher and clearer expectations for individual teachers in their appraisal targets to make sure pupils make good rather than expected progress
 - refining the school's development plan so that it only focuses on the main priorities and has clear deadlines which show the impact of actions on pupils' achievement over time
 - making sure that the pupil premium is used more effectively so that the gaps in attainment and progress close between eligible pupils and the others in the school.
 - making sure governors carry out their own checks on the school's main areas for development
 - setting clear roles and responsibilities for newly appointed leaders and filling vacant leadership posts as quickly as possible.

An external review of governance, to include a specific focus on the school's use of the pupil premium, should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 2–3 July 2014

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior leaders, members of the governing body, a representative from the local authority and the headteacher and a consultant from Manor Primary School. Inspectors also met with a group of staff, groups of pupils and with parents at the beginning and end of the school day.

Context

At the end of the summer term, seven teachers and two teaching assistants are leaving the school. An Early Years Foundation Stage leader has been appointed and will join the school in September, along with two teachers. One governor has resigned from their position.

Manor Primary School, a local teaching school, is providing support to improve the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of leadership and management.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Pupils' progress is improving steadily. Most pupils are now making the progress that is expected and an increasing proportion are making good progress. However, this improvement has not yet been sustained over a long enough period of time to ensure that all pupils are working at the level expected for their age. Progress has been slowest in Year 4 and in mathematics in Year 5. Leaders are aware of this and have appropriate plans to support these pupils more effectively in the next academic year. Inspection evidence and the school's tracking system show that an increasing proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium are making good progress and are closing the gap between their attainment and that of their classmates. Progress for disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs is variable across the school. Too few make the progress that they should.

Progress in Year 6 has been good. For some pupils, it is outstanding. However, this has not been sustained over a long enough period of time to help all pupils to achieve their full potential. The number of pupils reaching the expected level (Level 4) in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 6 will be closer to national averages this year than in 2013. Unvalidated test results show that the reading results will be comparable with the national average but results in mathematics and writing will be below average. Results from the end of Year 2 tests show an improvement on last year's outcomes. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected level will be in line with the national average in reading and mathematics

but will remain below in writing. Too few pupils achieve the higher levels in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Year 2 and Year 6.

Progress in reading across the school is a relative strength. This is because the teaching of phonics (the sounds that letters make) and reading have improved. However, senior leaders are aware that progress in writing across the school is a weakness and must remain a key priority.

School leaders analyse information about pupils' progress and attainment regularly and thoroughly. The summary information that is produced is accurate and helpful in identifying individual and groups of pupils who are underachieving. However, too much time is spent on producing this information in different formats for different purposes. The assessment leader is aware of this and is in the process of streamlining the summaries to produce only those that school needs in order to measure improvements and identify areas for further focus.

The quality of teaching

There is a strong commitment to improve from teachers and teaching assistants. The quality of teaching has improved significantly and pupils are now making better progress than in the past. This is as a result of intensive coaching from senior leaders and a programme of professional development provided by staff at Manor teaching school. The opportunities for teachers to observe good and outstanding practice has been particularly effective.

There is a tangible focus on ensuring that pupils learn new things in each lesson. All teachers are now aware of the importance of planning activities for pupils of different abilities and moving pupils on to harder work as soon as they are ready. Some teachers are more skilled at this than others, and some inconsistencies in practice remain. This is most prevalent in mathematics, where more-able pupils have to repeat work they have already done and are not moved on within lessons to apply what they have learned to a real-life problem or logic puzzle.

Pupils told inspectors that lessons are more fun because teachers plan tasks that are relevant to them and capture their interest. Pupils also told inspectors that their classroom displays are now more interesting and provide them with helpful advice and ideas when they are working on their own.

Where teaching is most effective, teachers are alert to pupils' misconceptions and inaccuracies, and correct them quickly and effectively. Teachers keep the pace of learning moving along well by asking challenging questions that require pupils to think carefully and explain their answers fully. Almost all teachers are making good use of 'talk partners' to promote effective speaking and listening skills and to encourage all pupils to be involved in the learning. This is helping pupils to make better progress.

There is still work to do to ensure that teachers' marking has an impact on improving pupils' work. There is insufficient guidance in the school's policy to help teachers with this. Although teachers mark work regularly, their advice is not precise enough and most teachers do not require pupils to follow their advice and make improvements to their work.

On the whole, teaching assistants provide effective support for pupils within lessons and in small-group activities. This is because they are clear about the purpose of the learning and understand what pupils need to learn by the end of the activity. In a small minority of teaching observed, the teaching assistant did not engage sufficiently with the children and learning time was wasted.

Children make good progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage. However, the outdoor area for reception classes offers too few opportunities for children to access a sufficiently wide range of activities spontaneously and independently.

The teaching of phonics is generally consistent and effective. Pupils are grouped carefully according to their ability, and lessons are brisk paced and interesting. There is still some work to be done to ensure that the pupils who struggle most with their phonics receive the most effective teaching to enable them to catch up quickly. Reading is taught regularly and effectively through guided reading sessions. Pupils have access to a wide range of books, and tasks are planned carefully to improve their understanding of the texts they read. This is leading to good progress in reading across the school.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Attendance has improved since the inspection in December 2013 and is currently above average. The number of pupils who are persistently absent continues to decrease. This is because the systems for following up absence are effective.

Pupils' attitudes to learning are increasingly positive. This is because teaching has improved. Pupils say that learning is more fun because teachers plan things that they are interested in. Better questioning is encouraging pupils to be more involved in lessons. However, this varies according to the quality of teaching.

Pupils move around school calmly and quietly. They are well mannered and friendly with visitors. Pupils and teachers say that behaviour has improved because of the new 'RESPECT' code. Behaviour is dealt with consistently across the school. Pupils told inspectors that, very occasionally, bullying occurs, but adults are better at dealing with it quickly and they are confident it will be sorted out. The small number of pupils who display challenging behaviour are supported well and the school keeps good records of the actions taken to resolve incidents.

Playtimes are well supervised and children generally play well together and enjoy their free time. Pupils told inspectors that they particularly like the 'boogie box', and older pupils have been teaching younger pupils to dance. Pupils eat quietly in the dining hall and adults promote good manners.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The headteacher and the senior leaders have begun the process of improvement with drive and determination. They have an accurate understanding of the areas of weakness and, with support from staff at Manor Primary School, have achieved a rapid pace of improvement. Leadership of the school is cohesive and effective, and the role of each member of the team is clear. Teachers told inspectors that senior leaders are visible and approachable, and are supporting them well to improve their teaching.

Teachers have individual learning plans which identify which area of their practice must improve. Teachers have benefited from effective coaching, team teaching and support with planning. This, in conjunction with visits to the teaching school to observe good and outstanding practice, has led to secure improvements in teaching. As a result, pupils are making better progress.

Leaders make regular checks on the quality of teaching and use an appropriate range of evidence to make accurate judgements. Teachers have been provided with a list of non-negotiable elements for their lessons. These have been effective in helping teachers to improve their practice. Senior leaders have monitored these non-negotiables regularly and, as a result, many of these elements are now consistent in each class.

Senior leaders make regular checks on teachers' assessments of pupils' progress. The accuracy of these assessments has improved significantly. Senior leaders are acutely aware of where additional support is required.

As a result of more accurate and thorough tracking of pupils' progress, senior leaders have a clear picture of the impact of their use of pupil premium funding. As a result, they are targeting the money more precisely to ensure that eligible pupils make good progress.

Actions to improve governance have been swift and effective. The skilled leadership of the Chair of the Governing Body and the support from the teaching school have been instrumental in this. New committees have been established, each with a clear remit. Governors have a better understanding of how to discharge their duties properly and are well informed about the issues facing the school. The interim strategic group is particularly effective and is providing school leaders with an appropriate level of challenge. Occasionally, minutes from meetings are not sufficiently accurate.

External support

The local authority has been effective in brokering the support of the teaching school and has appropriate plans in place to provide support for the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. However, the quality and accuracy of the report from the most recent review of the school was not as high as the school has come to expect.

The teaching school has provided effective support and is making a strong contribution to the school's progress. It is enabling the school to build capacity for further improvement.