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22 October 2014

Mrs Angela Hill
Headteacher
Milburn School
Milburn
Penrith
Cumbria
CA10 1TN

Dear Mrs Hill

Special measures monitoring inspection of Milburn School

Following my visit to your school on 21 October 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 January 2014. 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 local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school may not appoint newly qualified teachers before the next monitoring inspection.

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 Acting Corporate Director of Children's Services for Cumbria.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in January 2014

- As quickly as possible, improve the quality of teaching so that it is good or better, and so all pupils can make at least good progress in their learning, by:
 - making sure all teachers have high expectations about what pupils can achieve
 - ensuring teaching challenges the most able pupils so they learn at a faster rate and reach the higher levels of which they are capable
 - checking pupils' work and their progress regularly, marking their books carefully and using the information from this to plan and teach lessons that meet pupils' varying ages and abilities.

- Raise pupils' achievement in English and mathematics by:
 - improving pupils' ability to use and apply key literacy and numeracy skills in other subjects
 - making sure pupils make secure and brisk progress in spelling, grammar, punctuation and handwriting
 - accelerating pupils' progress in mathematics, particularly by broadening their experience of problem solving.

- Urgently improve the effectiveness of leadership and management, including governance, so that it has the capacity to make rapid improvements in teaching, achievement and in keeping pupils safe by:
 - making sure that all safeguarding requirements are met and that staff training is kept up to date at the level required
 - implementing comprehensive arrangements for checking on and managing the performance of teachers, including setting clear targets for pupils' achievement so teachers are held to account for the progress pupils make and inadequate teaching is eradicated
 - ensuring that methods for checking on and evaluating pupils' progress are firmly in place and that the resulting information is used carefully to determine clear and relevant objectives in the teaching and achievement priorities of the school development plan
 - making sure that all subjects of the curriculum meet pupils' needs and are planned in a way that builds securely on their progress and prior learning
 - developing clear policies and providing further training to guide teachers when they mark pupils' work and assess their progress, so that future teaching plans are based securely on reliable information
 - building leadership at all levels, including at headship level, and providing the opportunity for teachers to contribute to the leadership of subjects and aspects of the school's work.

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

Ofsted will make recommendations for actions on governance to the authority responsible for the school.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 21 October 2014.

Evidence

Her Majesty's Inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised a wide range of school and associated documentation, including external monitoring reports and evidence of classroom monitoring, as well as the revised school development plan and the local authority's statement of action. He met with the executive headteacher, the Chair of the Governing Body and four other governors. In addition, discussions were held with all four pupils in the school, a representative from the local authority and the full-time teacher at the school. A meeting was also held with six parents representing all the pupils in the school. No lessons were observed since the pupils were off site for most of the day, but a wide range of their work across a range of subjects was scrutinised.

Context

Staffing issues, which created uncertainty previously, have now been resolved. A new executive headteacher has been in post from September. In addition, two substantive teacher appointments have been confirmed, one full time and one part time. One pupil has left the school and there are now four pupils on roll. The link with Temple Sowerby Primary School has been further developed. Pupils are now taught science and a modern foreign language as well as physical education off site and have opportunities to participate in personal, social and health education. An external review of governance is currently under way.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Achievement is improving overall, especially in reading, writing and mathematics. However, the progress pupils are making remains inconsistent across other subjects. Pupils are making good and sometimes even better progress in their reading and mathematics and this is well supported by the individual help they receive on a daily basis. Progress in pupils' writing is good, but there is room for improvement, especially in their handwriting. Pupils are not yet consistently transferring the quality of handwriting seen in their handwriting books to work in other books. The work in handwriting books is mechanistic with pupils copying out passages of text without being asked to reflect sufficiently on the joining of letters or specific letter formation. A strength of the learning in mathematics is that pupils are using their good knowledge of number to solve word problems, something they had difficulty with a year ago. Most of the work in their books is ticked correct which, although a positive, also suggests that they could be set even more challenging tasks. Pupils' learning in other subjects is less secure and is often weak. Tasks set are not always allowing them to develop good knowledge, skills and understanding in the subject or enabling them to utilise their writing and numeracy skills effectively. For example, in science when studying the earth and the solar system, the Year 4 and Year 6 pupils spent several lessons making a papier-mâché globe and painting it a specific colour to reflect a particular planet. This occupies pupils and may be enjoyable but is not taxing and does not add to their understanding of the planets or the solar system. Progress in these other subjects is not helped by the fact that opportunities are restricted by the limited amount of time made available for these subjects in the teaching schedule.

The quality of teaching

From scrutiny of work and through discussions with pupils it is clearly evident that the teaching of English and mathematics is focused, well planned and good. Work set allows pupils of different ages to progress quickly in their learning. Teachers have benefited from training and recent professional dialogue with leaders in these subjects from St Catherine's Catholic Primary School in Penrith. However, the teaching of other subjects requires improvement since teachers currently lack the resources and subject knowledge to teach these subjects well. As a result, tasks set do not always challenge pupils. They often lack depth and result in an attempt at basic coverage, rather than the systematic development of specific knowledge and skills. The pace at which activities are completed is leisurely and could result in pupils not covering all of what is required, especially when the time allocated to many of these subjects is also limited. Pupils of all ages are expected to complete the same task and this often limits what can be achieved.

The quality of marking has improved and is especially secure in English and mathematics. Feedback through marking is clear and pupils act upon it to correct and develop their work. However, in other subjects it is more cursory and offers praise, rather than clear direction. Since September, assertive mentoring is being introduced to enable clear individual targets to be set for each pupil. This is at an early stage of development and has not yet had time to have an impact. Although discussions have taken place between the teacher and the pupils, discussions to involve parents about their child's progress are due to take place shortly.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour is not an issue. Pupils are happy and contented in the school and are keen to do well in their work and please their parents and teachers. Attitudes to learning are very positive. On the whole, pupils enjoy the opportunity to interact with other children on the days they attend lessons at Temple Sowerby Primary School. They are also pleased to return to the close-knit family grouping that is Milburn School, where they feel safe, well cared for and secure. They stated that they were 'resilient' and able to cope with and adapt to working in a larger school. Parents are very pleased about the care their children receive and identified that all the staff at the school are very approachable.

Issues about safety, raised at the time of the previous monitoring inspection have been resolved. All relevant staff have received appropriate training and systems are robust and now fully in place. Recording requirements, including checks on adults with access to pupils, are now complete and up to date. Pupils are familiar with safety routines.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

Staffing has been stabilised, with permanent staff now in post. The newly appointed executive headteacher has ensured that the various essential management structures and processes, including safeguarding, are now in place. For example, methods for checking on pupils' progress and the quality of teaching, although embryonic, are now established.

Arrangements to review teacher performance are also in place. Training is being provided to up-skill the teaching staff and good relationships have been established with parents and the local village community. Parents feel that 'At long last, the foundations have been laid for the school to develop'. There is still much that remains to be done and the future of the school remains uncertain. Weaknesses exist in the current curriculum structure, with insufficient time identified in the lesson timetable to ensure that all the requirements of the new national curriculum are being met. Teachers are less secure and lack the confidence to plan and teach lessons effectively beyond English and mathematics. The school website contains too much dated information and currently does not meet statutory requirements.

Governors are passionate and determined that the school remains open and a part of the local community. They are aware of their duties, meet regularly and have ensured that all statutory training, including, safeguarding training has been completed. Specific responsibilities have been allocated to individual governors who are clear about their duties. Governors are knowledgeable about the progress that has been made, but are less secure in their understanding of the curriculum and were unaware that the school website did not meet statutory requirements. They are fully aware that they will be expected to act on the recommendations of external review of governance which is currently under way. The governors' willingness and determination to secure the long-term future of the school is clearly evident, despite the current uncertainties.

External support

The school remains heavily dependent on outside support. This includes the local authority which has managed to broker and fund the current support of an executive headteacher from a local school. Following the judgement at the first monitoring inspection, the local authority has now taken appropriate steps to ensure that the statement of action is fit for purpose. Training has been provided for governors and an independent review of their effectiveness is currently under way. The school receives regular monitoring visits and there remains a commitment to support the school while a decision is made about its future. A good relationship is being established with St Catherine's Catholic Primary School in Penrith. Although still at an early stage of development, this is proving beneficial, through professional dialogue and shared in-service training, in developing the teachers at Milburn school. Pupils are also benefiting from the opportunities to have specialist language and sports training at their partner school in Temple Sowerby.

Priorities for further improvement

- A decision needs to be made about the future of the school since current uncertainty may hamper further improvement.
- Governors need to implement the recommendations of the forthcoming external review.
- The current teaching programme needs to be reviewed to ensure that the requirements to teach the new national curriculum are fully in place.