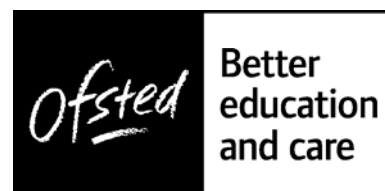


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18 January 2006

Miss P Golding
The Headteacher
St Peter's CofE VA Primary School
Church Lane
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Dear Miss Golding

SERIOUS WEAKNESSES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST PETER'S CofE VA PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Mrs Ann Taylor, Additional Inspector, to your school on 16 and 17 January, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school was found to have serious weaknesses in April 2005.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the senior management team, the chair of governors and a representative of the local authority. They observed 10 lessons or parts of lessons and spoke informally to other staff and pupils.

Context

The school had previously been through a period of considerable disruption in staffing and leadership. There is now a full complement of teachers and a permanent deputy headteacher.

Achievement and standards

Test results at the end of Key Stage 2 have risen since 2003 and were significantly above the national average in 2005, particularly in English. The results showed that the pupils had made good progress since their national tests in Year 2, especially in English and science. The girls did particularly well. However, results at the end of Key Stage 1 have been falling since 2002, from a high standard to a standard similar to the national average.

Overall, the pupils start school with higher attainment than is usual for their age. They make a good start in Nursery and Reception, so that they are well-placed to start Year 1. Because the staffing is now settled and effective, the pupils are making at least satisfactory progress throughout the rest of the school. Their attainment is broadly above the national picture in English, mathematics and science. They are articulate, although their speaking skills are better than their listening skills. The pupils read well with understanding and write fluently, although their handwriting and presentation generally leave much room for improvement and teachers do not always give a good example in their own writing. The pupils have a good recall of number bonds and calculate rapidly and accurately. However, there is much underachievement, particularly through Key Stage 2, as a result of the period of significant disruption. It is evident that many pupils previously made little progress in some years and have considerable ground to make up. There are gaps in their understanding of some mathematical concepts and particularly in areas of science.

With the support of the local authority, the school has worked effectively to identify shortcomings and to address them, so that pupils are now making the progress of which they are capable and starting to make up the lost ground, especially in English and mathematics. Progress in science is less evident; although the full range of the curriculum is being covered, including scientific enquiry, there is little work in many pupils' books and some of the topics appear to have been covered in a superficial way. This is also the case for some other subjects, such as history, religious education and design and technology.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in April 2005:

- Raise standards in English, mathematics and science – the school has made satisfactory progress overall.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils continue to have good attitudes to school; they are interested and keen to do well. They are particularly appreciative of the stability the new staff have brought, as many had an unsettling time in the past. Relationships are very positive and the school has a happy, harmonious feel to it. The establishment of an improved range of lunchtime clubs, at pupils' request, is helping them to develop new interests, which is a positive step. The school is beginning to look at ways it can make life healthier for pupils, but this is at an early stage. The care and safety of pupils has

improved and greater attention continues to be paid to this aspect of school life. Child protection procedures are now firmly in place.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in April 2005:

- Strengthen arrangements for child protection and health and safety - there has been satisfactory progress on strengthening arrangements for child protection, health and safety, with major improvements nearing completion.

Quality of provision

Of the 10 lessons observed, teaching was good in five and satisfactory in the remainder. The teaching in the Foundation Stage remains strong because there is a very good understanding of the needs of these young pupils and a determination to give them the best start possible. Teaching through the rest of the school is satisfactory and sometimes good, so that the pupils are building consistently on their knowledge and understanding. The local authority has provided considerable support to enable teachers to build on their expertise, particularly in the use of target-setting and the provision for pupils of different abilities. Teachers are clear about what they want their pupils to learn and share these objectives with them, although these are not always in language that the pupils readily understand. The teachers set different expectations for levels of ability in English and mathematics, although there is still some way to go in ensuring that the work is set at a realistic level and that the practice is applied to other subjects. Where teaching assistants were observed in class, they were making a high quality contribution to the teaching.

Class management is good and there is a calm working atmosphere in lessons. When the teaching is most successful, the tasks build rapidly on the pupils' knowledge and understanding, at the appropriate level for each ability group. The pace is brisk, and high expectations were demonstrated by challenging tasks. The pupils are prepared well for their work, with clear explanations. The teaching is lively, energetic and enthusiastic, with good subject knowledge and interesting activities, ensuring that the pupils are totally involved.

Throughout the school, the planning is detailed, showing what the pupils are to learn from the activity and therefore providing the teachers with a benchmark to judge the effectiveness of their teaching. Some teachers use questioning effectively to probe understanding and to promote thinking and the development of language. However, this is not always the case, and teachers tend only to ask those pupils who volunteer to answer. It was rare to see questioning specifically directed at particular groups and teachers are often missing opportunities to use questioning to assess the pupils' knowledge and progress. The pupils mostly maintain concentration and work together co-operatively. Time in lessons is normally planned carefully so that there is a good balance of activities. However, the pupils occasionally spend too long sitting on the carpet and become restless. At other times, the instructions are rushed and the pupils are given too many at once, so that they are confused.

Staff have made considerable progress in using and applying assessment systems in the core subjects, especially in the use and interpretation of assessment data. Teachers are now able to use this information to measure the progress pupils are making and to identify those who are underachieving. Assessment systems are still developing in the foundation subjects; teachers are recording progress in some subjects but there is not, as yet, a whole school approach. Giving pupils targets to aim for in English and mathematics is a very recent initiative; however, the school has made a good start and teachers are already referring to them in lessons.

There is a sound marking policy, which is being implemented satisfactorily in English; the teachers are developing their use of it but practice is inconsistent in other subjects. Consequently, marking does not always show the pupils how well they have done or inform them of what they need to do to improve. Neither does it provide sufficient information for teachers to assess how the pupils are progressing.

There is a satisfactory curriculum, relevant to the school's current needs, with a clear focus on improving provision in English and mathematics. Nevertheless, the large time allocation for English has diminished scope for work on other subjects. A large proportion of time is devoted to guided reading sessions, which do not always result in all pupils making worthwhile progress in their reading skills. The enrichment provision for pupils during the teachers' release time for planning and preparation takes up further curriculum time. In addition, there is considerable inconsistency in the time allocated for subjects other than English and mathematics and consequently the school is unable to ensure that there is sufficient time for each one. Provision for extra-curricular activities has improved and there are now a number of lunchtime clubs run by staff.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in April 2005:

- Strengthen the recruitment and retention of teachers - good progress has been made in providing a settled and enthusiastic staff.
- Establish effective assessment and recording systems for all subjects - there has been good progress in improving assessment systems in core subjects; systems for foundation subjects are at a much earlier stage of development.

Leadership and management

The headteacher provides good leadership for the school and has built an enthusiastic senior management team who support her well and are developing their own leadership skills rapidly. They are clearly focused on raising standards and are working closely together with a sound understanding of the school's effectiveness. The whole staff work well together as a team, with high expectations and commitment to improvement. Management is satisfactory. The local authority has worked closely with the school and has supported it very well in identifying which key priorities to address most urgently. Consequently, the pace of improvement has been rapid but managed carefully. The methods for evaluating the school's work are

thorough, and therefore there is a secure view of many of the strengths of provision and almost all areas where improvement is needed. Evaluations of lessons are realistic and rigorous, identifying areas of strength and where improvement is needed. Through the analysis of test results, the school has a sound understanding of the relative strengths of the core subjects and where there are gaps.

The action plan is well-constructed, showing clearly what is to be done to address all areas for improvement. The timings are precise and responsibilities allocated, although these rely heavily on the headteacher. Measures to monitor and evaluate are thorough and success criteria are specific. The plan is carefully costed. The strategies employed to raise standards and bring stability have been effective. The subject coordinators are developing a reasonable understanding of standards in their subjects and are beginning to take the initiative in planning to bring about the necessary improvements. However, while the school knows where standards need to be improved, there has not been sufficient monitoring of the coverage and balance of the curriculum.

Governors are providing good support for the school and are fulfilling their responsibilities conscientiously. Well led by the chair of governors, they monitor the school's progress rigorously and have a clear understanding of what needs to be done to further improve the standard of education. The school is well-placed for further improvement.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in April 2005:

- Implement robust systems of self-evaluation and the use of performance data - good progress has been made in developing the use of a range of strategies for self-evaluation.
- Devise a strategic plan with priorities and strategies for several years ahead - the school is presently working solely on the action plan and this is appropriate for the time being. There are suitable plans to begin the period of consultation about long-term strategic planning very soon. Satisfactory progress has been made.

External support

The local authority has provided good support for the school. The post-inspection statement demonstrates that it has been aware of the school's difficulties for some time and has provided much support for teaching and leadership and management in the past. Urgent and appropriate action was taken when necessary. The local authority's own plans show that a suitable level of appropriate support is to continue and there are effective measures for monitoring the progress being made. There are useful strategies for evaluating the impact of its own actions. Almost all the required information is included. The support and challenge provided have been very effective in helping the headteacher to develop her expertise and in ensuring that the staff had the training needed to improve their practice.

Main Judgements

The school has made good progress in removing the causes of its serious weaknesses.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue the rapid development of assessment and target setting:
 - to track the pupils' progress, set shorter term targets for them and to plan their work
 - to measure the effectiveness of teaching and the curriculum and to set long-term targets for attainment
- Implement stringent systems for monitoring the curriculum and ensure that all subjects receive an adequate coverage
- Develop the teachers' use of questioning as a key teaching and assessment strategy

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the diocese and the Director of Education for Hertfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Pat Cox
Additional Inspector