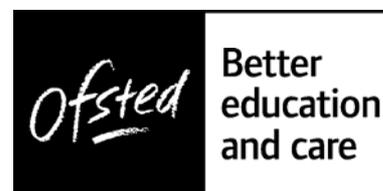


CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22 West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

Direct Tel
Direct Fax

Email – name.name@ofsted.gov.uk

www.ofsted.gov.uk



17 March 2006

Mrs P Wade
Acting Headteacher
St Austin's Catholic Primary School
Heath Street
St Helens
Merseyside
WA9 5NJ

Dear Mrs Wade

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST AUSTIN'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with, Mr R Bulman, additional inspector to your school on 15 and 16 March 2006, 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 became subject to special measures in October 2005.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher and other members of the senior leadership team, the consultant headteacher, members of the school council, the chair of governors, a representative from the Archdiocese and two representatives from the local authority.

Context

Since the school was placed in special measures in October 2005 the headteacher has left the school and has been temporarily replaced by the deputy headteacher. The LA has brokered the support of a consultant

headteacher from another local authority school. The school is in receipt of a large amount of support from the LA's officers, consultants and from two advanced skills teachers from local primary schools. A new governor has been appointed by the LA and the Archdiocese are to add a governor to the school's complement. In the autumn term 2005 the school received an International School's Award for its very good work in modern foreign languages and the LA also awarded the school an Early Year's Kite-mark. Since January 2006 the school has appointed a part-time teacher to support the Year 6 pupils and has reconfigured the work of another teacher to reduce the class size in Year 4 for part of each day. Teaching assistant hours have been increased and targeted at two pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The school has recently admitted five pupils and the roll is now 269. The LA and Archdiocese are in discussions with the governors of St Austin's and another catholic primary school with a view to having only one catholic primary school in the parish.

Achievement and standards

Pupils joining the school have standards below those attained in schools in similar social circumstances. The progress made by pupils during their time in school has improved although overall it remains less than adequate. More recent teachers' assessments indicate that while a significant number are still not achieving average levels, a higher proportion of children are achieving beyond them.

In 2005, validated results at the end of Key Stage 2 continued the variable pattern of previous years but with improvement in English. Teachers' assessments, confirmed by inspection evidence, indicate that some improvement has occurred in reading and writing, but that, despite improvements, fewer pupils attain higher than average standards in numeracy and science.

Observations in lessons show that the amount of satisfactory progress being made is increasing, and in some instances progress is good. The school still has concerns with the underachievement of girls.

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

- Raise standards in reading, writing and mathematics at Key Stage 1 and science at Key Stage 2 – satisfactory

Personal development and well-being

The pupils' spiritual and moral development is good and firmly rooted in the school's Christian ethos. Their social and cultural development is correspondingly strong. Building on careful early nurture on entering the nursery, the pupils respond well to established routines, shared responsibilities and individual opportunities such as being members of the school council and undertaking roles as class monitors.

In an atmosphere of trust the pupils increasingly understand and learn how to recognise and express their feelings and concerns. Their attitudes reflect confidence; they are polite and their behaviour in lessons and at play is good. The pupils' enjoyment of school is widely evident in its positive ambience and their own generally upbeat responses to lessons and extracurricular activities, including sport. Pupils feel safe in school and relate to adults in a mature and sensible way. They benefit from involvement in healthy living campaigns as well as charity work, surveys of local opinion and links with partners in industry and European countries. The pupils undertake several modern foreign languages which add much to their personal qualities and prepare them well for later life. The pupils' awareness of social justice and concern for others is promoted well through close links with the church and the local community. One pupil stated, 'In this school nobody ever gets left out'.

The attendance rate is slightly below the national average and punctuality is satisfactory.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is improving. The main characteristics of lessons that were good or better, and others with good elements, were teaching that had a swift pace, in which pupils were challenged to meet time targets; resources being readily available so that the flow of the lesson was not impeded; good teaching assistant support for less able pupils; the promotion of co-operative skills between pupils and; most notably the promotion of active learning. For example, role play was used well with less able pupils in a Year 2 Literacy lesson to help them gain an understanding of different verbal expressions.

The main reasons why some lessons were judged to be satisfactory and not good were because parts of the lessons were too long, without changes of activity and consequently some pupils drifted off task. There was a modest pace to these lessons which did not convey sufficient urgency to the pupils.

Planning has improved and is good overall. Teachers are using a common planning format which requires them to match work to the needs of groups of pupils. However, there is still room to include more definite outcomes for different groups of pupils and to note the work of teaching assistants more clearly in the planning. There remains a lack of challenge for some more able pupils.

There have been good developments in the provision of information and communication technology (ICT). The use of interactive whiteboards and digital projectors is helping to make lessons more interesting for the pupils.

Recent training on learning styles has resulted in teachers identifying different learning styles in their planning although there is less evidence of this being applied in practice.

Training in 'assessment for learning' is planned for later in the term. Nevertheless, there have been some developments in assessment which have contributed to improvements in the quality of teaching. An annual assessment schedule and progress tracking document have been introduced. These are beginning to be used well by teachers to set targets and to plan additional interventions for groups of pupils, particularly those who are less able. These targeted interventions are well organised and have drawn upon guidance from the National Primary Strategy as well as support and guidance from the LA. Teachers are using assessment data to establish targets for individuals and groups of pupils. Pupil self-assessment has been introduced in ICT and is already well established in science and modern foreign languages.

The arrangement to reduce the class sizes in Year 4 and Year 6 for English and mathematics is a promising development.

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory, and it now meets adequately the needs of most pupils. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are fully included in lessons. Time allocations to subjects have been readjusted, so that sufficient time is now given to English, mathematics and science.

The school continues to add to its extracurricular provision, sometimes at the behest of the school council. Year 2 pupils, for example, enjoyed a visiting drama group's lively comedy about 'number crunching' prior to their end-of Key Stage 1 tests. The school's exceptional modern foreign languages provision continues to be recognised within the local authority and at national level.

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

- Increase proportion of lessons where teaching and learning are good or better – satisfactory progress
- Ensure policies for assessment are better understood by all staff and are consistently implemented – satisfactory progress
- Ensure whole school curriculum meets the needs of all pupils – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

The school's raising achievement plan is good. The plan is being monitored regularly by the senior leadership team and the LA's project group. Judiciously, the acting headteacher, consultant headteacher and the LA, have concentrated in the first instance on establishing a culture of school improvement. They have been successful; staff morale is high and staff are receptive to the changes being made. Management systems and structures, which were not in place or were not working effectively, have been introduced or modified. These are now becoming embedded as established practices in the school. There are a few early signs that these changes are resulting in increased progress and raised attainment for some pupils but overall the changes are still to bear fruit.

The acting headteacher has willingly accepted advice and support from the LA and the consultant headteacher. As she has grown in confidence the support of the consultant headteacher has rightly lessened. She has an accurate view of the school's strengths and weaknesses and is demonstrating resolve and enthusiasm in applying the management systems and holding staff appropriately to account.

A monitoring and evaluation policy has been agreed and a schedule of monitoring is in place. However, formal lesson observations have not been undertaken. The LA has training planned for the senior leadership team and subject co-ordinators. The commencement of the training has sensibly been brought forward following discussions during this monitoring visit. Subject co-ordinators are at various stages in discharging their responsibilities. Most have scrutinised work and planning and have fed back to staff, some have additionally reported on their area of responsibility to the governors. The core subject co-ordinators have analysed performance data to help staff determine targets for individuals and groups of pupils.

The governing body is beginning to hold the school appropriately to account. They have been well supported by the LA and consultant headteacher. The

quality of information they receive from the school has improved and the minutes of the well attended meetings show due consideration of the information presented. Link governors have been established for the core subjects and some have received reports from the corresponding subject co-ordinators. These are helpful but are generally descriptions of actions rather than an identification of outcomes for pupils. Suitable training has been provided for the governing body.

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

- Senior managers need to systematically monitor new initiatives to make sure that they are leading to measurable school improvement – satisfactory progress
- Improve the way the school keeps a check on the progress and effectiveness of the actions it introduces – satisfactory progress

External support

The LA's statement of action is clear and appropriate. It demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the school and outlines the actions taken prior to the school becoming subject to special measures. The associated school action plan is also good and charts the actions planned through to July 2007. The plan identifies success criteria for each of its actions, along with lead personnel, costings and monitoring and evaluation arrangements. A project group has been established which co-ordinates support and monitors the progress made by the school on a monthly basis; this has a suitable range of representatives. The records of the project group's meetings show good scrutiny and evaluation of the school's progress. The LA has also formed a school support team from across its services and has targeted this support well at staff, senior management and the governing body. The Archdiocesan Adviser is providing pastoral support to the school. The LA has been providing a high level of support and challenge to the school since autumn 2004 and continues to do so but it recognises the need to reduce the level of support as the school improves. The removal of delegated powers has been duly considered but has not been pursued. The target date of December 2006 for the removal of special measures is ambitious.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures - satisfactory.

Quality of LA's statement of action - good

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Measure the impact of actions and include this in reports to the the governing body and project group
- Improve the planning for more able pupils

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children and Young People's Services for St Helens, and the Archdiocese of Liverpool.

Yours sincerely

Eric Craven
H M Inspector