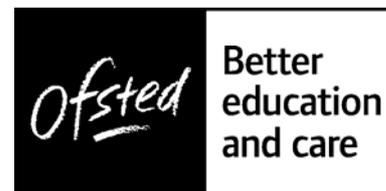


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22 February 2006

Mrs Annette Jones
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Dear Mrs Jones

SERIOUS WEAKNESSES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF ST MARY'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Kathy Taylor and John Eadie, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 24 and 25 January 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 was found to have serious weaknesses in June 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 13 lessons. We talked with pupils, observed them at play and sampled their past work. Inspectors attended a hymn practice. We met with the senior managers, subject and phase leaders, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

One newly qualified teacher has joined the school this term, working part time in the Years 1 and 2 class. The deputy headteacher is given release from class teaching for a half day each week for management activities.

Achievement and standards

Although results were not available to inspectors at the time of the last inspection, the pupils had already taken their Year 2 and Year 6 standard assessment tests before that inspection took place. Subsequently, the published results confirmed that few pupils were attaining the higher levels in the Year 2 tests. Results in the Year 6 tests were also lower than they had been in previous years. Pupils underachieved in English, with again few pupils attaining the higher levels.

Since the last inspection the school has put in place satisfactory procedures to improve pupils' achievement in English and mathematics in Years 1 and 2 and these are beginning to have an impact in raising standards. Less priority has been given to raising standards in history throughout the school and the action taken, for example in improving resources, has not yet had an impact in improving pupils' achievement.

Children make a good start in the Reception and the mixed Reception and Year 1 classes. However, their good progress is not yet being built on effectively through the rest of the school. Pupils' progress in lessons was at least satisfactory in all lessons seen in Years 1 and 2, which represents a significant improvement from the previous inspection. However, there were some weaknesses in pupils' progress in lessons in Years 3 to 6, particularly in English.

A weakness identified at the time of the previous inspection was the lack of challenge for more capable pupils. Although some lessons now include a better match of activities for these pupils, a scrutiny of pupils' books in English and mathematics indicates that this is not always the case. When the work is undemanding, more capable pupils are not making the expected progress.

Clear analysis has been carried out of weaknesses in pupils' knowledge in English and mathematics, resulting in targets being set for pupils' future learning. It was evident during the inspection that teachers are trying hard to address these targets in mathematics. For example, a weakness identified was in pupils' ability to subtract. Almost all mathematics sessions have therefore been designed to incorporate at least a short practice session on subtraction skills which is improving pupils' performance in this area. In English, there is not the same consistency of approach in tackling identified weaknesses.

The focus on raising standards and achievement now needs to be extended from Years 1 and 2 to include older classes and ensure that pupils make steady progress as they move through the school.

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

- raise achievement and improve teaching in English and mathematics in Years 1 & 2, and in history throughout the school—satisfactory progress.

Personal development and well-being

Children make good progress in their personal development in the Reception class and the mixed Reception and Year 1 class. The children are managed effectively and quickly learn to follow orderly routines. Children respond to this well and good levels of concentration and initiative were seen in these classes. Behaviour is also good and children respect the needs of others well.

Pupils' attitudes to their learning through the rest of the school are usually positive, as they were during the previous inspection. However, there are inconsistencies and, where teaching fails to interest or enthuse them, there are examples of pupils exhibiting unsatisfactory attitudes. In these lessons there is sometimes inappropriate behaviour as well. The instances of unsatisfactory behaviour were almost all instigated by boys. Part of the reason for this is that the teachers do not have consistently high expectations of good behaviour. Teachers are too accepting of pupils chatting and of other instances of minor disruption during their lessons.

Relationships between pupils and between pupils and adults are good. This is indicative of the Catholic ethos of the school where all are valued. Behaviour at playtime is satisfactory although there is some over boisterous play. Pupils generally enjoy school and their attendance is good, but they say that they find some lessons boring. Although bullying is not a major issue there are a number of minor incidents which pupils say are not always dealt with effectively. The pupils have not been involved in raising awareness of bullying and how to deal with it.

There were no key issues relating to personal development from the last inspection.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning were satisfactory in seven of the thirteen lessons seen, good in four and inadequate in two. All of the good teaching seen was in Reception and Years 1 and 2. Both of the inadequate lessons were in Years 3 to 6. Overall, teaching and learning are much the same as at they were at the last inspection, but the specific weaknesses in Years 1 and 2 have been tackled successfully.

Teaching and learning in the Reception year are good. Staff have a good understanding of how young children learn best. Well planned topics ensure that children learn well across each of the six areas of learning through interesting and often exciting activities. Staff encourage pupils to develop independence, to take responsibility, and make choices about their work and learning.

The last inspection report identified some general weaknesses in teaching in Years 1 to 6 including the quality of assessment and marking, and the level of challenge for more able pupils. Although senior managers have begun to tackle these shortcomings, these aspects of teaching remain inadequate especially in Years 3 to 6. Marking is carried out regularly and it provides some encouragement to pupils. However, it is not always detailed enough to reliably assess pupils' progress and understanding or to provide feedback to them about how they might improve their

work. These weaknesses in assessment and marking limit the teachers' ability to plan work that fully meets the needs of pupils of different capabilities.

This inspection highlighted other aspects of teaching that need improvement. Teachers' expectations of pupils' work and behaviour are too low. In some lessons teachers do not deal effectively with inattentive pupils or the few who call out and distract others. Teachers in Years 3 to 6 too readily accept the untidy and unfinished work that is evident in pupils' books. Senior managers and subject leaders are aware that plenary sessions at the end of lessons are not sharply enough focused on evaluating pupils' learning and moving it forward. Further training to develop staff's skills in this area has, therefore, been planned.

A number of good features of teaching are also evident in Years 1 to 6. For example, teachers enjoy positive relationships with pupils. In the most effective lessons, teachers choose interesting activities that help to make learning meaningful, as was evident, for example, in reading and writing activities in Years 1 and 2. Pupils in Year 6 say how much they enjoy learning about history by using artefacts and video materials and by collecting information about their own family history. Teaching assistants are well trained and they often make a good contribution to pupils' learning during group activities. During whole class teaching sessions they could, on occasions, be better deployed to support pupils' learning or to help pupils to stay on task. Assistants' focused teaching of groups during literacy and numeracy lessons is often good.

All pupils now have English and mathematics targets and are beginning to understand their significance. Some good use of self assessment was also seen, particularly in Years 1 and 2.

The satisfactory curriculum, with strengths in extracurricular provision, has been maintained since the last inspection. The curriculum in the Foundation Stage of learning is good. The school is beginning to develop links between subjects in Years 1 to 6 but needs to give greater attention to ensuring that these links are used effectively to develop pupils' basic skills, especially in writing. The school has successfully addressed the weakness in history resources that was previously identified as an impediment to teaching and learning.

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

- raise achievement and improve teaching in English and mathematics in Years 1 and 2, and in history throughout the school—satisfactory progress
- implement effective assessment procedures and use the information gathered to plan work for groups and individuals—inadequate progress
- ensure that more capable pupils are challenged fully in all lessons—satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

The headteacher and senior management team have made satisfactory progress in implementing the school's action plan. They have drawn on the good support

provided by the LA to begin to tackle the weaknesses identified in the last inspection. Staff with management responsibilities, including the deputy headteacher have been given more regular release time from their classroom teaching to enable them to carry out their management roles. In turn, the headteacher has begun to delegate more and so allow herself more time to devote to monitoring the quality of pupils' work and of teaching. Governors have approved a new structure for the senior management team with a tighter focus on literacy and numeracy and each of the key stages. This is due to be implemented this term.

Over the course of the last term there has been a demonstrable improvement in the monitoring of pupils' work and of teaching so that this now has greater rigour. Priority has been given to tackling weaknesses in teaching although the school recognises that it has much further to go, particularly in raising expectations and in making more effective use of assessment. The school has been particularly successful in securing improvements in teaching in Years 1 and 2. This was previously identified as most in need of improvement but, with Reception, it is now where some of the best practice can be found, including in marking and assessment.

School self-evaluation is now more realistic. It is based on more regular monitoring and on careful analysis of the results pupils attain in the national tests in Years 2 and 6. It has contributed to the more challenging targets that the school has set for pupils' achievement.

Governors have taken ownership of the school action plan. They quickly realised that they previously had an overly rosy view of how well the school was doing. They have availed themselves of the training and support offered by the LA and have actively monitored the school's progress in achieving the targets set in its action plan.

Although the school has wisely avoided the temptation of allowing itself to be distracted by wrangles over school buildings, it is aware that improvements are needed to the learning environment. The cramped L-shaped classrooms are less than ideal for whole class teaching, there is noise from neighbouring lessons in the semi open plan areas and, in one class, the noisome toilets make for an unpleasant working atmosphere. The school has raised with the diocese the need for improvements to the accommodation.

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

- improve the leadership and management of the headteacher and key staff – satisfactory progress.

External support

The LA's statement of action is good. The LA has given the school very effective support. It has helped the school to draw up and monitor progress in implementing its action plan. It has provided well focused advice, particularly with literacy and numeracy and on improving monitoring. Given the previously identified weaknesses in leadership and management, the LA's guidance has been especially valuable in

enabling the headteacher and senior managers to develop the confidence and competence to carry out their roles. This has included opportunities to learn from the experience of other schools as well as to benefit from the good range of in-service training arranged by the LA.

Main Judgements

The school has made satisfactory progress in removing the causes of its serious weaknesses. This visit has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the school's performance will be monitored.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise teachers' expectations of work and behaviour.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Director of Education for Leicester and the Director of Education for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Nottingham.

Yours sincerely

Selwyn Ward

Additional Inspector