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Mrs Janice Schofield
The Headteacher
Parsons Down Infant and Nursery School
Paynesdown Road
Thatcham
RG19 3TE

Dear Mrs Schofield

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF PARSONS DOWN INFANT AND NURSERY SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Sheila Nolan Additional Inspector to your school on 17 and 18 May 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 December 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 members of the senior management team, the chair of governors and the local authority's school improvement adviser. The views of pupils were gathered informally. Inspectors observed 8 lessons or parts of lessons.

Context

The context of the school is largely unchanged from that in December 2005. There have been no changes in staff and the number of pupils is still 228. The governing body has been re-constituted with four new governors.

Achievement and standards

Children's skills when they start school vary greatly within and between years. Relatively few children have particularly well developed skills on entry. Many pupils now in Year 2 started school with skills at lower levels than might be expected for their ages, particularly in language and communication.

Provision in the Foundation Stage has improved well since December 2005 and children are making satisfactory progress with some good features. In Years 1 and 2, standards were significantly below average from 2001 to 2004 in reading, writing and mathematics. Standards rose in 2005 and in reading and mathematics were broadly average. In writing, despite a slight rise in 2005, standards were still significantly below average.

Standards in lessons show a mixed picture and indicate uneven progress across Years 1 and 2 and between classes within a year group. Standards in writing continue to be lower than those in reading. Standards of presentation are low. In the main, progress in lessons is satisfactory but teachers often miss opportunities to speed up pupils' progress so that it becomes good. Good progress was seen in a lesson in Year 1 where pupils studied the life cycle of the ladybird. The teacher made effective links between science and English, and set high expectations of what pupils would achieve. In Year 2, very few pupils are working at levels above those expected for their age and the school's analysis shows that more able pupils are underachieving. The 2006 mathematics assessments for Year 2 pupils were available at the time of the visit and show that most pupils have made adequate progress in mathematics; the overwhelming majority reached or exceeded their targets. In some cases, however, not enough was expected of pupils. Pupils who have learning difficulties are making satisfactory progress because teachers and support assistants plan appropriately for and meet their needs.

The school has developed further its mechanisms for tracking each pupil's progress and is able to identify more clearly those pupils who are underachieving. Although data are compiled well, the way they are stored does not allow senior staff to gain a quick overview of how well the school is doing in terms of the progress of whole year groups.

Personal development and well-being

The school has maintained the calm ethos noted at the time of the last inspection. Working relationships at all levels are warm and pupils co-operate well with teachers and other adults. There have been no permanent exclusions. Pupils clearly enjoy school and feel secure. They are happy to express their thoughts and feelings and some are very articulate. Attendance figures for the last term are average and similar to those at the time of the inspection with most absences related to health. Pupils' punctuality to school has also improved although there

are a few persistent offenders. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development remains satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are satisfactory and sometimes good. Some progress has been made in improving the quality of teaching and learning since the last inspection, particularly in the Foundation Stage where there are now clearly defined workshop areas that support pupils' independent learning. Greater flexibility in planning now ensures that groups of children move freely across the spaces. Adults are deployed well to support children and encourage next steps in learning.

Throughout the school, teaching and learning are underpinned by warm relationships, good classroom organisation and management, and the use of interesting resources in many cases, making for good behaviour and positive attitudes to work. Planning has improved but a number of lessons still lack a clear enough focus or precise intended outcomes for pupils. In these lessons, neither teachers nor pupils are clear as to what exactly has been learned in the lesson. Activities are not always matched successfully to the needs of more able pupils who are often unchallenged, despite being in groups based on prior attainment. Some marking is good but, overall, marking does not systematically provide enough guidance to pupils on how to improve their work. There is, however, an increased understanding among staff of how to assess and improve the quality of pupils' writing, noted as weak in the inspection last December. Teachers have a reasonable understanding of how much progress is expected of pupils over a year, particularly in writing, because considerable focus has been placed on this. In the Foundation Stage, teachers track carefully the pupils' progress but in other year groups recording of attainment is not so systematic. Good progress has been made in developing targets for writing and to a lesser extent for reading, which are about to be used with pupils.

The Foundation Stage curriculum has improved and is satisfactory. There is a good range of activities for exploratory and independent play and for indoor and outdoor education. In all year groups, the school has rightly placed a strong emphasis on developing writing. The school has plans to encourage cross-curricular links to support writing in different subjects but these have not been fully implemented. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) across the curriculum is not well developed, partly because of hardware problems.

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

- strengthen the teaching to raise standards, particularly for more able pupils, in writing and in the reception class – satisfactory progress.
- improve assessment and target-setting so that work is better matched to the needs and abilities of the pupils – satisfactory progress.

Leadership and management

There has been satisfactory improvement in leadership and management. Senior managers, governors, and advisers from the local authority have worked on preparing an appropriate action plan for improvement. The school has a realistic view of its performance and the areas in which it needs to improve.

The governing body was re-constituted from 1 May 2006 and was strengthened with the appointment of four new governors, two placed by the local authority. Governors have begun a programme of training with a view to developing further their understanding of how to keep the school under review and hold it to account. Governors are suitably organised but have not yet worked assiduously enough to determine specific indicators by which they will judge the school's improvement. To date, governors have received reports from senior staff that comment primarily on processes the school has developed or implemented but which give insufficient information about what impact the actions are having on provision and outcomes.

Senior managers, with support from the local authority, began to tackle identified shortcomings soon after the inspection and the pace of endeavour increased after the report was published in March 2006. Most progress has been made in improving provision in the Foundation Stage where a positive impact on children's learning and progress is showing. Much work has been undertaken, with support from the local authority's literacy consultants, to develop teachers' skills in promoting pupils' progress in writing. Some good work has been done to develop assessment and the use of assessment data by class teachers although more remains to be done. Teaching has improved but the task of keeping it under review has not yet been tackled vigorously enough by senior managers. Senior managers have not yet taken stock of the extent to which teaching and learning have improved since last December. The school and local authority have striven to make improvements. They have not, however, taken the necessary time to reflect on and identify the benefits of training or initiatives adopted in order to gain a tangible sense of progress and boost morale.

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

- Improve leadership and sharpen school improvement planning so that it focuses on raising attainment and the achievements of the pupils – satisfactory progress.

External support

The local authority's statement of action is satisfactory. It includes some good proposals for support, particularly for improving teaching and learning. The school has valued and benefited from the support of the local authority's Early Years School Improvement Adviser. Support for literacy has been effective in developing skills in the teaching of writing although the impact has yet to be seen clearly. The school has been helped to map out the route for improvement but not enough has been done to ensure that senior managers are fully confident in making accurate judgements about the quality of lessons against shared criteria. The plan does not show how senior managers will be helped to make more speedy and efficient use of attainment data. The local authority has sound arrangements for keeping the school's progress under review and a review visit is planned to take place later this month.

Main Judgements

- Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory progress.
- Quality of LA's statement of action – satisfactory progress.
- Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop further the school's systems for storing data about pupils' attainment to allow for speedier analysis of their progress and to identify more clearly where intervention or improvements are necessary.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Chief Improvement Adviser for West Berkshire.

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
H M Inspector