



Mrs R Blakemore
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CH44 7ED

27 September 2006

Dear Mrs Blakemore

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

Introduction

Following my visit with Denise Shields and Frank Ravey, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 26 and 27 September 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 March 2006.

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, nominated staff, a group of pupils, the chair of governors and representatives from the local authority (LA). Informal discussions were also held with other members of staff and pupils.

Context

The headteacher has been on prolonged sick leave. The acting headteacher, who was leading the school at the time of the inspection, has remained in post. Two members of the teaching staff were also absent due to illness. At the time of the visit all the pupils from the three Year 5 and Year 6 classes were on a residential visit and were accompanied by several teachers from the school.

Achievement and standards

In 2005, too few pupils in Key Stage 2 achieved the levels expected of them in the national assessments in English, science and mathematics. Results were below average in science and significantly below average in mathematics and English. In the most recent national assessments in 2006 standards remained broadly similar. Attainment in mathematics rose slightly but declined slightly in English and science. The more able pupils performed better in 2006. The percentage of pupils gaining Level 5 rose slightly in mathematics and in English there was a significant rise from the very low base of 5% in 2005 to 27% in 2006. The school did not achieve its targets in the 2006 national assessment tests. To some extent weaknesses in the 2006 results are explained by some difficulties in pupils' behaviour and the below-average attendance of this year group.

In Key Stage 1, pupils achieved close to the average in 2005 in reading, writing and mathematics. However, in 2006, results dipped in mathematics and fell more sharply in writing and reading.

Evidence seen during the inspection indicates that pupils are making satisfactory progress overall in their learning. Some are making good progress. Assessment information suggests that the pace of learning for some pupils is accelerating, but this is not widespread throughout the school. The school's assessment data also shows that there is still a significant legacy of underachievement. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities generally made satisfactory progress in their learning, partly due to the help provided by trained teaching assistants.

Pupils enter the Foundation Stage with levels of skills, knowledge and learning that are below average. They make generally good progress, particularly in their personal and social development, but on entry to Year 1 the skills of many pupils in literacy and numeracy are still below average.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils are well behaved in lessons and around the school. They enjoy school and show good attitudes to their work. As a result they are keen to learn. The inspection in March noted some low-level disturbance in classes by a small minority of pupils, but this was not evident during this visit. Pupils are strongly aware of the need for a healthy diet and they are enthusiastic about the ways the school helps them achieve this.

Pupils show a good sense of right and wrong. They work well together when asked to do so and play happily at breaktimes using the good quality apparatus provided. The influence of the school's Roman Catholic ethos is very evident on pupils' good spiritual, moral and social development. The previous inspection pointed to weaknesses in pupils' knowledge of other cultures. The school is addressing this issue. The school's attendance is below

average and is well below this in some classes. For example, in the first few weeks of this academic year attendance in one Year 6 class was below 90% overall.

Quality of provision

Six lessons were observed during the inspection. Of these, two were good and none inadequate. This is an improvement on the position found during the previous inspection.

In the Foundation Stage, teaching is lively and focuses effectively on meeting the needs of young children. A good emphasis is placed on children's personal and social development and the teaching of language and literacy skills. Good teamwork ensures that children's progress is closely monitored and built upon. As a consequence, additional help is targeted well to help children improve. Learning is usually good because children enjoy the activities offered and thrive in the friendly classroom atmosphere.

Teaching and learning are now satisfactory in Years 1 to 6. This is confirmed by the school's own monitoring of teaching. Whilst there are pockets of good practice, teaching is not consistently strong enough throughout the school to ensure that all pupils reach their full potential and overcome the legacy of previous underachievement.

Good relationships characterise most lessons. Pupils enjoy learning. Strengths in teaching include the use of good questioning to assess pupils' understanding and a range of suitable activities that are matched well to pupils' needs and abilities. A further strength was the effective use of the end of lessons to reinforce key teaching points. However, these strengths are not evident in all lessons and, as a result, not all pupils make the progress that they are capable of.

Some teachers have high expectations of what they want pupils to achieve. They share the intended outcomes of lessons with them and therefore pupils are clear about what they are to do and what they will learn. Activities challenge pupils so that their knowledge and skills are extended. However, in many instances there is an over-reliance on the completion of worksheets. Pupils are not given sufficient opportunity to apply their literacy and numeracy skills in a range of contexts in other subjects. Consequently, this holds back the pace of pupils' achievement in these areas.

Teachers' planning and their use of day-to-day assessment are now regularly monitored by the senior leadership team. There are good examples of detailed planning and of the good use of assessment information gained from

each lesson. In these instances the needs of all pupils are well catered for and their progress is effectively built upon. However, this is not the case in all classes. Not all teachers take sufficient account of how much pupils have understood and the progress they have made.

Teachers mark work regularly, but practice is not consistent. Although comments are supportive and offer praise, they do not clearly indicate to pupils what they need to do to improve.

The school is developing a system to track pupils' progress. Some elements of this, such as that which tracks pupils' progress in mathematics, are good. It enables the school to quickly and clearly identify individual underachievement. However, this useful practice in mathematics is not used to track performance in the other core subjects. As such, the current system is cumbersome and in need of refinement. It is still too early to assess the impact the assessment system is having on raising standards.

The curriculum in the Foundation Stage is satisfactory. There is a good emphasis on promoting pupils' independence. Learning activities are well organised. However, opportunities are missed to use the outdoor facilities as an integral part of the planned daily activities so that children's learning can be extended further. Curriculum provision in Years 1 to 6 is satisfactory. Enrichment opportunities are regularly provided and these contribute strongly to pupils' personal development.

The care, guidance and support provided for pupils are satisfactory and firmly based on Roman Catholic principles. Pupils are safe and well cared for. Systems to safeguard pupils, including the most vulnerable, are robust. Guidance for pupils on how to make the best progress in their academic work remains variable. This is because there is too much inconsistency in the use of day-to-day assessment and other information to plan work that precisely meets the needs of all pupils. The school is starting to address this. Targets in writing for individual and groups of pupils have been introduced this term and provide guidance on the next steps pupils need to take in their learning. These are not yet commonly used in other subjects. When they are, they are often too general to provide clear guidance to pupils on what they need to do next in order to improve their work.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning to raise achievement and standards in English, mathematics and science – satisfactory.

Leadership and management

The prolonged absence of the headteacher has resulted in some uncertainty about the future leadership of the school. The acting headteacher has a clear view of how the school should improve and is determined to raise standards. With the support of the LA she is providing clear direction for the school. She has a sound awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and of the issues which need to be tackled to improve pupils' performance. She is loyally supported by other colleagues on the leadership team. Her expectations of teaching and learning have been made clear, but there is as yet no overall agreed school policy for these aspects of school life.

Action has been taken to strengthen the leadership and management of the school. The senior leadership team now meets regularly and minutes are kept of decisions reached. Communication has been greatly improved between staff. For example, minutes are now kept of staff meetings and made available to all staff. The monitoring skills of the leadership team have been extended by undertaking joint observations of lessons with officers from the LA. The school's self-evaluation is improving. It is now more accurate and more realistic about the challenges facing the school although it does not yet provide a clear analysis of the performance of pupils.

The new school improvement plan is shared with staff and sets out clearly the key priorities for the school. Through its focus on standards, and the need to improve teaching and learning, it is contributing to the greater understanding by staff and governors of the school's new strategic direction. Staff are kept up to date on its progress. However, the plan is not specific enough in what it requires of individual staff, such as subject managers. Many tasks, for example, are allocated to the senior leadership team that could be delegated to other staff. Recent, unplanned changes in subject responsibilities have added to the workload of the leadership team. As a result, several teaching staff now have no curriculum responsibility and no-one has overall responsibility for the key area of mathematics in the school.

Initiatives have been taken to improve standards. Teaching in ability groups has been introduced in mathematics and literacy for Year 6 pupils. Teachers' planning and timetabling are now routinely monitored by the acting headteacher and written feedback is provided. Regular scrutiny of pupils' work has been initiated. A number of useful intervention strategies designed to improve pupils' performance, such as the Early Learning Strategy and Springboard mathematics programmes, have been implemented. Teaching assistants have been trained in the use of a number of these strategies. Time has been set aside each half term for teachers to assess pupils' progress. This, allied with the recent developments in assessment and tracking procedures, has made teachers more aware of where underperformance lies.

The school has drawn effectively on the advice and expertise of the LAs officers in order to begin developing consistent and improved day-to-day

assessment procedures. Several staff meetings have been devoted to training on this. Increasingly, targets, such as those already adopted for writing, are being introduced to promote improvement and to involve pupils in their education. This is at an early stage of development. The acting headteacher has apt plans to use more refined targets for the improvement of pupils' standards, as part of the statutory performance management arrangements for teachers. However, it is too soon to judge the full impact of these changes on standards or pupils' progress in learning.

The joint lesson monitoring programme, led by the LA, has enabled the senior leadership team to observe all members of staff teaching mathematics. Support has been provided by the acting headteacher for those where weaknesses were identified but not all have taken full advantage of this.

The governing body is strongly supportive of the acting headteacher. Governors have participated in training in order to develop their role as 'critical friends to the school'. Other training has deepened their understanding of the school's performance data. They are beginning to provide more challenge to the school's leadership and are in a much better position to hold the school and its staff to account on the issue of pupils' progress. A new mission statement has been approved. Particular governors have been linked to subject areas of the curriculum, such as numeracy, literacy and science. A protocol for their visits to classrooms has been agreed and a schedule of observations drawn up.

There is now a growing sense of teamwork at the school, united by a greater appreciation of the urgent need to raise pupils' achievement and standards. The understanding that everyone is accountable for the progress that pupils make in their learning is also growing. Consequently, morale amongst staff is rising.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2006:

- Improve leadership and management so that:
 - the school has clear direction for improvement;
 - monitoring ensures that staff at all levels are made accountable for standards and performance – satisfactory.

External support

The LA has provided strong support to the school. Officers from the LA routinely visit and meet with the school leadership to discuss and advise on its progress. They have led the programme for the monitoring of teaching and the LAs consultants have advised the school on the development of a range of subjects. An informal link has been established with an experienced headteacher to support the acting headteacher. The LA has also provided the school with valuable support from its personnel services. In addition, the LA

is committed to funding the Intensifying Support Programme from the start of the next term.

Two additional governors with a strong background in education have been appointed to the school. One has been appointed by the LA and one by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Shrewsbury.

The LAs statement of action is satisfactory and follows national guidance. The suggested date for the removal of the school from special measures is ambitious.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory.

Quality of LAs statement of action – satisfactory.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of all staff and ensure that all key areas of school life are covered.
- Strengthen management further by developing a robust and rigorous internal system for the monitoring of teaching and learning.
- Improve day-to-day assessment ensuring better and more consistent academic guidance for pupils.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Director of Children's Services of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council and the diocese.

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
H M Inspector