

27 March 2007

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

Dear Mrs Schofield

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF PARSONS DOWN INFANT SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Lynn Bappa, Additional Inspector, to your school on 20 and 21 March 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third 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 (including nine lessons or parts of lessons), scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, deputy head, a group of staff, a group of pupils, the chair of governors, and a representative from the local authority (LA).

Context

The context of the school is largely unchanged since the last monitoring visit in October 2006. A few staff changes have occurred. The composition of the governing body has changed greatly with some departures and new members. The number of vacancies on the governing body has moved from three to two. The number of pupils on roll has dropped from 230 to 180. The new building for the Foundation Stage has been occupied.

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, particularly in relation to their language and communication skills. The children currently in the Foundation Stage are now making a good start at school because the provision for them has continued to improve. Provision is well planned, interesting, engaging, challenging and enjoyable. Children make good progress in all of the main areas of learning. By the time children leave the Foundation Stage and start Year 1, their attainment is generally similar to what can be expected of them for their ages. The successful work of providing more able children with additional challenges is enabling some of them to achieve above expected levels for their ages.

In the 2005 Year 2 tests, standards in reading and mathematics were broadly average but in writing they were below average. The 2006 results were lower than those in 2005 and very few pupils reached above expected levels. School assessment records suggest that the rate of pupils' progress is increasing throughout the school and moving towards being satisfactory. Predictions for the end of Year 2 tests in 2007 show that standards are expected to rise from 2006 but not necessarily back to the average results of 2005. The proportions of pupils predicted to achieve above expected levels (Level 3) are very low other than in mathematics.

Pupils' work in lessons shows that they are generally making satisfactory progress but there is still more work to be done to enable some pupils to catch up and reach the levels of which they are capable. This is particularly true for the more able pupils and is linked to the fact that teaching does not always identify clearly enough what they can already do confidently and how their learning can be extended. Pupils' progress in mathematics and reading is better than in writing. Progress in writing is speeding up because of the increased focus placed on it and because teachers are clear about how to plan for pupils' next steps in developing their writing skills. There are still too few occasions or lessons, however, in which pupils make good progress. Pupils who have learning difficulties or disabilities are continuing to make satisfactory progress.

The school's assessment records show clearly the levels pupils are working at and how many sub-levels they move through from one assessment point to another. The school has yet to develop its processes further to evaluate the progress of year groups as a whole, or that of sub-groups, in order to judge more accurately for itself the school's overall effectiveness.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being are good. Pupils are, as in previous monitoring inspections, polite and considerate to each other and co-operate well with teachers and other adults. Attendance continues to be satisfactory and there have been no permanent exclusions. Pupils enjoy coming to school and abide by the school's expectations of good behaviour and hard work. They say learning is fun. Most develop their speaking skills well and are confident in conversations with adults and each other. Pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is satisfactory with some good features that occur through religious education, assemblies and a link with Ghana, for example. Pupils understand about healthy eating and are aware of the need to respect safety rules. The relatively new School Council has begun to make its mark, primarily through charity work. Pupils are reasonably well prepared for the next stage of their schooling and for their future economic well-being.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning continue to be satisfactory with some good features, particularly in the Foundation Stage classes and in the teaching of writing. Some aspects of provision have improved since the last visit. These include lesson planning, assessment and in the clear sharing of lesson objectives with pupils. Teaching in the Foundation Stage is now good and children there are being well prepared for the next stage in their education.

Throughout the school, relationships with pupils remain positive. Pupils are keen to learn and behave well in lessons and around the school. More effective lesson planning has improved pupils' understanding of what they are expected to learn and why; this is generally more secure for literacy and numeracy than for other subjects. Teaching assistants provide good support to pupils who need extra help, particularly those with learning difficulties and disabilities. Provision for more able pupils continues to be an area which has not been developed to any significant extent except in the reception classes. In the main, more able pupils are still not challenged enough in most lessons to achieve their best.

The curriculum in the Foundation Stage has improved and is now good. Activities cover all six areas of learning and there is a clear emphasis on independent exploratory play. Children move easily and confidently between different activities and are gently guided to the 'must do' task of the day. Features such as the free writing wall help to make the transition to more formal learning in Year 1 smoother. The curriculum in Years 1 and 2 remains satisfactory although some subjects appear to be covered thinly. The school has now resolved most of its hardware problems in relation to information and communication technology (ICT) although the use of ICT remains an area for development. All classrooms have interactive whiteboards but

teachers' skill and expertise in making the most of them for teaching and learning are still rather limited.

Care, guidance and support for pupils have improved because the element of this work relating to academic guidance is stronger now than in December 2005. Pupils are in the main clear about their targets in English and mathematics and staff keep a close check on pupils' progress. Other elements, relating to care and welfare, have continued to be good. All staff, teachers and support staff, play a good part in ensuring that pupils feel safe and get the support they need when in personal difficulty at school.

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

Progress in improving leadership and management since the last monitoring inspection is visible. There are still some concerns, however, about whether improvements are secure enough to be thoroughly sustained and whether the school is able to generate its own impetus for improvement and be totally clear about what it needs to do to raise its performance further. Nevertheless, enough has been done for progress in this area to be judged as satisfactory. At this rate of improvement, the school is likely to take the full two years before the need for special measures is lifted.

Progress has been maintained on developing whole school systems for assessment and undertaking a more accurate self-evaluation of the school's effectiveness. Teachers are more confident about the planning of lessons, although there are still some lack of clarity about what exactly needs to be done to raise the overall quality of teaching and learning from satisfactory to good. Work on improving pupils' standards in writing continues to have a positive impact. Teachers have become increasingly more confident in assessing pupils' work, particularly in writing and mathematics where the 'intensifying support programme' (ISP) is having a positive impact on pupils' standards and achievement. The Foundation Stage classes have moved into their new accommodation and staff have succeeded in making it into an exciting learning environment. Work on improving provision for more able pupils is still at an early stage. The extent to which all staff share a clear understanding of how the school should look and work in the near future is less than might be hoped for at this stage. The school has responded well to much of the support provided by the local authority but there are some tensions between the two, particularly in relation to the amount of support needed and in the pace of some activities for improvement.

There have been many changes in the composition of the governing body although the chair remains the same. With other governors, the chair has put into place good systems for keeping the school's progress under review although many governors are new to them and developing the necessary skills to enact them. Governors are clearer than before about what to look for in terms of school improvement but a sense of pace has not been established firmly enough. Minutes of governing body meetings and notes of other meetings show that actions taken as part of school improvement activities are now more closely evaluated against outcomes for pupils but more still needs to be done here. The caretaking arrangements, found to have shortcomings at the time of the last monitoring visit, have improved to some extent with the part-time return to work of the caretaker. Governors, with support from the local authority, have addressed some financial difficulties linked to the drop in numbers on roll and the costs of the new Foundation Stage building.

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 has provided satisfactory support although more could be done to work with the school on establishing the pace of change and helping staff to share more widely with each other their learning gains in relation to assessment for learning and the use of ICT across the curriculum, for example. The school has valued and benefited from the support of an advisory headteacher and consultants from the local authority, most recently from that of the numeracy consultant.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Establish more clearly the timeline for developments and actions over the next few months, with a view to completing the current five-part plan and developing an outline for future improvements. Ensure that actions for improvement are undertaken with good pace and clarity of purpose, particularly in the work to move the overall quality of teaching and learning from satisfactory to good.

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

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
H M Inspector