



Mrs R Blakemore
Acting Headteacher
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Wheatland Lane
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Merseyside
CH44 7ED

26 January 2007

Dear Mrs Blakemore

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

Introduction

Following my visit with Chris Griffin and Jon Lovgreen, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 24 and 25 January 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings. The visit was the second 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, the chair of governors, the school council and a representative of the local authority (LA). Informal discussions were also held with members of staff and pupils.

Context

Since the previous monitoring inspection the headteacher has taken early retirement. The school has continued to be led by an acting headteacher. During the inspection two members of staff were absent. One class is presently taught by a temporary teacher.

Achievement and standards

Pupils enter the school with levels of skills and knowledge that are below average and in some cases well below. They make good progress in their personal development in the Foundation Stage but weaker progress in numeracy and literacy. On entry to Year 1 the levels of ability in literacy and numeracy of many pupils remain below that expected for their age group. In Key Stage 1 in 2006 the standards attained by pupils were significantly below average overall. Results in writing were particularly weak. In the most recent statutory assessments in Key Stage 2, the attainment of pupils was significantly below average in English, mathematics and science. Results for the more able pupils were also well below average in mathematics and science. The progress made by pupils from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 2 was well below average. Pupils made least progress in mathematics.

Standards of current pupils remain below average overall. In most lessons observed, pupils made satisfactory progress in their learning and some made good progress. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress overall, partly due to the good support they receive from additional adults. Assessment data provided by the school suggests that more pupils are starting to make better progress in their learning. Overall, learners are making stronger progress in literacy than in mathematics. A number of useful and well targeted strategies have been initiated in order to raise achievement. This is particularly the case in mathematics in Key Stage 2, where the 'springboard programmes' are being taught to help pupils catch up in their learning. However, too many pupils are still working below the levels expected for their age group. The school is realistic about the distance it still has to travel in order to overcome the legacy of underachievement.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils' personal development and well-being are satisfactory. Relationships are good and pupils respect the work teachers and other adults do. Classroom behaviour is satisfactory. Most pupils are courteous and thoughtful but a minority can become silly. Attitudes to work vary. Whilst the majority work steadily and conscientiously, too many pupils easily become distracted and do not see that enjoyment of school partly relies on the effort and concentration they put in. Behaviour is good around the school at break and lunchtime. Pupils play well together and take care not to disturb each other's activities. Older pupils respond well to responsibilities such as acting as play leaders or helping to serve snacks. The school council meets regularly and pupils are pleased with its influence, for instance in advising on the detail of the climbing frame and soccer area. The school has made considerable efforts to make pupils and parents more aware of the need for regular attendance. Nonetheless, attendance remains stubbornly below average. Pupils have a good awareness of the value of healthy lifestyles and diet. This is demonstrated by their sports and play activities and lunchtime choices. Pupils' spiritual, social and moral development remains good. Pupils are

increasingly aware of, and interested in, other cultures and religions and how these impact on people's lives. This is because the school has increased the opportunities for pupils to study other cultures.

Quality of provision

Almost all lessons observed were satisfactory or better. The proportion of good lessons has increased since the previous monitoring visit. Good relationships between adults and pupils continue to be a consistent feature in lessons. Planning is increasingly based on clear learning objectives which teachers explicitly share with pupils. This clarity about learning outcomes, and how they will be achieved, is giving a stronger sense of purpose to lessons. Teachers use interactive whiteboards well to catch and maintain pupils' attention on the learning tasks. In good lessons the pace of learning is fast. Lessons start promptly, a sharp focus on learning is quickly established and the rate of learning is sustained. A good range of learning methods is used and little time is wasted. Probing questions are used effectively and are often targeted at individual pupils, which challenges their thinking and learning. Explanations are clear and there are good links with literacy to help pupils learn and apply correct vocabulary.

In other lessons, where teaching was satisfactory, there are some weaknesses. Time is not always well used and the pace of lessons is not fast enough. Pupils' understanding of tasks is not always checked. As a result they sometimes do not know exactly what they are expected to do. There are shortcomings in the range of methods teachers use for conducting question-and-answer sessions. Questions are not probing or challenging enough. Sometimes when a question is addressed to the whole class, a chorused reply from a few is accepted. Those who do answer individually are not consistently challenged to expand on their initial replies. Too many pupils are content to let others answer. Frequently, pupils are not invited or expected to respond to what others have said. These flaws in the management of question-and-answer sections reduce the levels of participation in learning for too many pupils.

Teachers' planning provides more explicitly for the different levels of abilities in lessons. Inspectors frequently saw pupils of different abilities being given different tasks. However, opportunities for pupils to apply and develop their writing skills in a range of genres across different subjects are missed. For example, there is relatively little extended writing in Year 6 pupils' history and geography books.

The school is working hard to establish new and appropriate methods in the use of assessment and target setting to improve the progress of pupils. Recently, each pupil has received a target setting book. This initiative is in the early stages of implementation and it is therefore too soon to evaluate its full impact. More pupils, though not all, have a more secure knowledge of their learning targets. However, few are clear about the National Curriculum levels they are working at. Other initiatives, such as displaying school targets in

classrooms, are established, although not always in the same format. This is potentially confusing for pupils. Marking is supportive and some is good, although there are some inconsistencies. Pupils are often commended for their efforts but it is not always made clear what it is that has been done well. Comments do not always make it clear what the next steps are that pupils need to do in order to improve. Where comments about improvement targets are made they are not yet related to National Curriculum levels.

The quality of care, guidance and support provided for pupils is satisfactory and firmly reflects the school's Roman Catholic principles. Caring attitudes are clearly evident in the courteous relationships between adults and pupils. There is good provision for pupils with hearing impairment. Individual education plans are in place but neither pupils nor parents are routinely involved in their review. As yet, there is no separate method for the school to track the progress of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

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

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

Leadership and management

The acting headteacher, with the strong support of the LA, has continued to provide clear direction and sound leadership for the school. She has continued to place a heavy emphasis on the need to raise standards. Staff have responded positively to this. The clearer direction she is providing has helped to raise staff morale and further develop the growing sense of teamwork. This is matched by a greater awareness amongst staff of the urgent need to raise standards. Action has been taken to address priorities for improvement which were identified on the last monitoring inspection. Management has been strengthened by developing the school's internal monitoring procedures, which in the past were largely led by the LA. A number of literacy lessons have been observed by senior staff in the previous term. The acting headteacher's judgements of the effectiveness of teaching are broadly accurate. Where weaknesses in teaching have been identified, useful support has been provided and accepted. A schedule has been drawn up for the next round of monitoring which is appropriately focused on another core subject. Satisfactory job descriptions have been drawn up and agreed with all teachers. All major curriculum areas are now managed by a subject leader. This clarification of the roles and responsibilities of teachers has helped to ensure greater accountability amongst staff. Timely plans exist for the introduction of the statutory performance management arrangements for teachers.

Good use has been made of the LA's consultants in training staff in the monitoring of the school's work. Planning in the core subjects is now checked by curriculum and senior leaders. Feedback on the quality of planning is provided to teachers, although much of this is informal. Several checks of

pupils' work have taken place and suggestions for improvement are given to staff. Staff meetings have been well used to provide pertinent training and to raise teachers' expectations of teaching and learning. A teaching and learning policy has been drafted but has yet to be agreed.

The acting headteacher has strongly supported the introduction by the LA of the national Intensifying Support Programme (ISP) in order to raise standards. A training day on assessment has also been held. Whole-school literacy and numeracy targets, and more individualised targets for pupils, have been recently established. New methods for regularly checking how well pupils are doing in English and mathematics have been introduced. Arrangements for tracking the progress pupils are making have been extended. However, weaknesses in how initiatives and agreed policies are communicated throughout the school have led to some inconsistencies in the implementation of assessment measures. This has weakened the reliability of some data. Consequently, this has lessened the usefulness of this data to the school in its drive to raise attainment.

The school improvement plan has been updated and revised in order to make it clearer who leads which improvement action. It is not yet fully clear who monitors these actions. The headteacher has evaluated satisfactorily the effectiveness of the school's actions to raise standards but there is scope to analyse the progress and achievement of current pupils in much greater depth. The school has worked hard to bring about a marked improvement in attendance. Phone calls on the first day of a pupil's absence and increased contacts between school and home have been implemented. Rewards and certificates for high attendance have been introduced. Parents are kept informed about new developments through informative newsletters.

The governing body is strongly supportive of the acting headteacher and her drive to raise standards. They are growing into their role as a critical friend to the school. A separate strategy committee oversees the progress that the school is making in raising achievement and standards. A number of governors who shadow curriculum subjects have visited the school to observe lessons. Their findings are discussed at governors' meetings. Plans have been laid to begin the process of appointing a permanent headteacher.

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 progress

External support

The LA continues to provide extensive and good support for the school. Useful links with experienced headteachers are well used to support the acting headteacher. The LA has funded and initiated the ISP. Numeracy and literacy consultants have led a number of staff meetings. Officers of the LA regularly visit to assist in monitoring lessons, to provide advice and to assess the school's progress. The school has drawn heavily on the LA's personnel and financial resources. The diocese has worked closely with the LA on a number of improvement issues.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection –satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of good teaching.
- Ensure that new strategies for improvement are consistently and fully implemented.
- Improve assessment so that all pupils are clear about what they are doing well and what they need to do to improve.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael McIlroy
H M Inspector