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Mrs K Bye
The Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Bye

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MARSHLANDS SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit with Gavin Jones and Peter Lawley, Additional Inspectors, to your school on the 8 and 9 May 2007, 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 April 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, acting deputy headteacher, members of staff, groups of pupils, representatives of the governing body, and representative of the local authority.

Context

Since being placed in special measures, the headteacher, deputy headteacher and the Key Stage 1 coordinator have been on long term sick leave. In March 2007, a consultant headteacher was appointed as acting headteacher, a teaching and learning consultant was seconded as a consultant deputy headteacher, a temporary special needs coordinator was appointed following a resignation, and a Year 2 teacher resigned. Current staffing also includes temporary teachers in Years 1, 2 and 4. Governors had their delegated powers removed and the chair and vice chair of governors resigned. The school is currently undergoing major building works.

Achievement and standards

The previous report evaluated standards as exceptionally low in much of the school and standards remain inadequate. Pupils' speaking, listening and independent learning skills are weak. Recent tracking, monitoring and evaluation of pupils' progress show that, although attainment is still inadequate, the rate of progress shows some improvement other than in Year 4. In Year 4, pupils' progress is slower than in other year groups and remains low. Work sampling in Years 1 to 6 indicates that too many pupils have not made enough progress until very recently. Lesson observations confirm this and many pupils have a legacy of underachievement to make up for. School data indicates pupils' progress in mathematics to be better than in literacy and this reflects the impact of consultant support. The local authority and school are working well together to raise pupils' achievement and teachers' expectations of pupils' capabilities. Training is resulting in some improvements in teachers' subject knowledge, skills, lesson planning, and use of tracking information and is the reason why some progress is being made in pupils' achievement. Progress in reading and writing in Years 5 and 6 is higher than in other year groups because the focus on improving pupils' basic writing skills is used more successfully and staffing is more stable. Previous intervention strategies have been reviewed and withdrawn because they were ineffective. Senior leaders have identified pupil underachievement and a review of more effective support to meet pupils' needs is pending. However, lesson planning and assessment do not yet ensure all pupils, especially those with learning difficulties and disabilities and the more able, are always challenged and supported well enough to meet their different abilities.

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

- raise standards and achievement in reading, writing and mathematics in Years 1 to 6 – inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils have generally satisfactory attitudes to learning. Behaviour has improved considerably since the introduction of the new behaviour policy. This has involved pupils, parents and staff working together. Pupils value the more consistent approach to managing the poor behaviour which has impeded their learning. During longer periods of learning, pupils' concentration wanes and a few resort to petty squabbles and silliness. Many pupils lack the skills to work unaided and can be too easily distracted. A few lack basic social skills. Those who find it difficult to control their behaviour may choose to withdraw to the 'nurture room' to 'cool off' and they respond well to the calm atmosphere. The number of days lost to exclusions has reduced, reflecting more effective management of behaviour. Attendance has improved and is now satisfactory because of incentives such as 'cool cats' and the robust measures taken to reduce absence. Pupils say they now feel safe and secure

and have an increasing knowledge of healthy lifestyles. They enjoy the reward systems and appreciate the new play equipment and brighter classrooms.

Quality of provision

Teaching is of varied quality. Some improvements have been made, but most have been introduced too recently to raise standards. Behaviour has improved following the introduction of a logical system of rewards and sanctions which is beginning to establish a more purposeful environment for learning. Where teaching is strong, there is good planning, underpinned by clear objectives. Teachers refer to and use lesson objectives to move learning forward with a variety of stimulating activities. Focused questioning helps to consolidate and build knowledge, whilst additional members of staff help groups of slower learners effectively. Teachers make good use of national initiatives to develop literacy skills. For example, a Year 6 literacy lesson captured pupils' imagination and curiosity with a thought-provoking exercise where pupils had to devise their own questions to put to their teacher who pretended to be a character in a poem. Their analytical ability and secure understanding of narrative developed rapidly as a result.

Where teaching is weaker, lessons lack pace, teachers talk too much and leave pupils working on their own without checking that they understand and can do the work. Opportunities are missed to develop speaking and listening skills. Pupils are unable to work independently because they have not been expected or taught consistently to do so. Often, teachers do not identify pupils' levels of work accurately against national expectations. As a result, they often fail to pitch the level of work right to challenge more able pupils or to build confidence for those with learning difficulties and disabilities.

A recent audit revealed an imbalance in subject coverage and this has been tackled. The curriculum now meets requirements. Nonetheless, inconsistencies remain in the quality of provision for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities and the more able. Plans to reinforce the teaching of learning skills, ensure continuity, and improve the quality of lesson planning to meet pupils' needs better are imminent. Pupils enjoy breakfast club and the popular extra-curricular activities.

The school has put in place a new system to track pupils' progress and check for underachievement, but its usefulness is hampered by teachers' lack of skill in reliably assessing pupils' learning. In some classes, pupils are given targets and advice on how to improve, but this is inconsistent. Many pupils do not know how well they are doing and lack advice on how to improve.

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

- improve the quality of teaching and eliminate unsatisfactory teaching by improving assessment and ensuring work is well matched to pupils' needs – inadequate.

Leadership and management

Successful temporary steps have been taken to bolster the senior management of the school, although overall leadership and management remain inadequate. The acting headteacher and deputy provide stability and have improved staff morale. They are well supported by the local authority.

A clear improvement plan has been drawn up. Impact is already being felt as behaviour is improving. A member of the school council said, 'We are more focused on being good.' Improvements have been made in attendance through better information to parents and the use of an incentive scheme.

The roles of staff in positions of responsibility remain largely underdeveloped due to several long term absences. New systems for assessment and tracking progress are in place, enabling teachers to relate standards in their classes to national expectations. However, not all teachers are making full use of assessment information to set clear targets for pupils and adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of all.

Teaching and learning are monitored by the headteacher and deputy headteacher, who have identified the inconsistencies across the school. As a result, support is being given, where appropriate, to improve teachers' competence. Modelling of teaching in the classroom has begun to have a positive effect on the quality of some teaching in literacy and numeracy. The school is tackling appropriately the need to raise standards and achievement, especially in literacy and numeracy. Consultants support the school well and projections of improvements which should accrue show pupils in Year 6 expected to achieve the subject targets. The new special needs coordinator is ensuring that pupils receive their appropriate entitlement and that support work for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities meets statutory requirements.

Whilst in the past governors have struggled to take on their responsibilities and hold the school to account, they have had training, although it is too early to note the impact of this. Given the very recent improvements the school is well placed to build on further developments.

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

- improve school leaders' ability to bring about improvement, and the systems for monitoring and evaluating pupils' achievement – inadequate
- improve pupils' attendance by implementing more rigorous procedures for raising attendance – satisfactory.

External support

The local authority is providing significant support to the school from several consultants. The support from the literacy and numeracy consultants is beginning to make a difference to the quality of teaching. The local authority's statement of action covers all of the improvement areas and it is clear and well thought out. Appropriate actions are scheduled throughout the planned recovery period.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate.

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve pupils' independent learning skills.
- Make adjustments to the curriculum and lesson planning to support and challenge further more able pupils and those with learning difficulties and disabilities.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, and the Director of Education for Children's Services for East Sussex.

Yours sincerely

Sheila Browning
Additional Inspector