

12 December 2007

Mr A Croft
Headteacher
Charles Darwin Primary School
Darwin Street
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Cheshire
CW8 1BN

Dear Mr Croft

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you, your staff and your chair of governors gave when I inspected your school on 11 December 2007 with my colleague, Mark Williams, HMI. I appreciate the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information you provided before and during our visit. Please also extend our thanks to the pupils who spoke with us during the day, whether in classrooms or during the arranged meetings.

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.

As a result of the inspection in April 2007, the school was asked to:

- improve the achievement of more able pupils in English, mathematics and science
- improve teachers' planning so that the more able pupils are challenged well in lessons, and improve the use of marking, assessment, tracking information and target setting so that all groups of pupils are achieving to their potential
- improve standards of pupils' writing.
- Ensure that the transitional arrangements for the incoming headteacher are effective in maintaining the recent momentum towards progress and school improvement.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising pupils' achievement.

Since the April 2007 inspection the new headteacher has taken up his position with effect from September. The substantive appointments of the deputy headteacher

and the head of infants have been confirmed, strengthening the capacity of the senior leadership team. A reduction in the number of pupils on roll has necessitated some rearrangement of classes to include two mixed-age groups. This has been carefully considered and organised by senior leaders and governors to ensure continuity of education for those pupils. The smaller than average classes, along with additional support staff, have increased the opportunities for small-group and individual support for pupils.

In the 2007 Key Stage 1 assessments of reading, writing and mathematics Year 2 pupils reached standards which were well below average overall. Standards in writing were extremely low, and no pupils achieved above the expected level in this area, despite the signs of improvement indicated during the last inspection. There was also a significant difference between the performance of girls and boys, with boys reaching lower standards in each subject, especially writing. Evidence shown to inspectors supports the school's view that a disproportionate number of pupils who were capable of reaching above average standards left the school before assessments took place. In addition, Foundation Stage records show that a significant number of children in that year group entered the school with below average skills, particularly in communication, language and literacy. The school is taking action to boost the achievement of those pupils, who are now in Year 3.

In the 2007 Key Stage 2 tests pupils reached overall standards which were just below the national average, a similar picture to the school's performance in the previous two years. This masks variations, however. Mathematics and science results were stronger and the proportion of pupils reaching the higher level was in line with the national picture. English results were below average and a lower proportion of pupils achieved the higher level in this subject. As a result, progress in English was inadequate overall.

The school continues to receive good support from the local authority's advisers and consultants. Transitional arrangements for the new headteacher ensured that he was involved in regular meetings alongside the previous acting headteacher during the summer term. This process included discussions with staff and governors, and involvement in the appointment of the deputy headteacher. These arrangements helped to ensure a smooth transition and to maintain the momentum towards school improvement.

Senior leaders articulate a clear vision for the school, with a strong focus on raising standards. Staff, governors and pupils have clear confidence in the new headteacher's leadership, and morale is high. Alongside this renewed sense of optimism, the confidence and expertise of teachers is growing further. The proportion of lessons in which teaching and learning are good or better is increasing as a result. The more able pupils, who had been identified as underachieving at the last inspection, are now making satisfactory and sometimes good progress. Teaching assistants are well deployed in lessons to help teachers in supporting lower-attaining pupils or challenging those who are capable of more. Senior and middle leaders have a clear picture of the school's areas for development in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Leaders have been well trained and supported in developing the necessary skills to monitor performance and plan for improvement.

Teachers' planning is monitored regularly by the deputy headteacher and useful feedback is given, so that planning is now consistent across the school. Plans identify the needs of pupils of different ability groups in each class. Teachers plan differentiated work by varying tasks, support and intervention so that all groups are suitably challenged. The school is aware that on occasions there may be some variation between what is planned and what actually happens in practice, and staff training continues to include a focus on differentiation to improve this further. The school's marking policy has been reviewed and the quality of teachers' marking is generally good. Inspectors saw examples of teachers asking questions in their marking comments and pupils responding to these in order to improve their work and understanding.

The impact of the school's efforts to improve pupils' writing can be seen in the emphasis given to this in good quality displays around the school. A wide range of writing activities is provided, enhanced by opportunities to write about first-hand experiences, for example visits to places of interest. Writing is also promoted as an integral part of topic work across other subjects such as history and science.

Assessments of pupils' work are carried out regularly and are carefully recorded in the school's good tracking system. This is developing well, although there are occasions when teacher's assessments may be a little generous, particularly of pupils' writing. Standards in writing have improved across the school, but the legacy of underachievement and the continuing need for 'catch up' work mean that the Key Stage 2 targets for 2008 may not be met in this area. The school has set challenging but realistic targets for the proportion of pupils expected to reach above average standards overall at the end of each Key Stage in 2008.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "M. McCloy".

Marguerite McCloy
Her Majesty's Inspector