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Mrs P Bowden
The Headteacher
St Michael's Church of England Aided Primary School
Nantmel Grove
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Dear Mrs Bowden

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a Notice to Improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your school on 30 January 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions, and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. It was particularly helpful to spend the morning with you, observing lessons, looking at pupils' work and analysing assessment information.

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 on 19 and 20 June 2007, the school was asked to: improve standards and progress, especially in writing ensuring that pupils are consistently expected to produce good work; increase the challenge in lessons, particularly for the more able; and, ensure that information collected on how well the pupils are doing is used to tackle underachievement quickly.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making inadequate progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement. Nevertheless, you and senior teachers have the capacity to bring about improvement at a more rapid rate than in recent months. As a result of discussions during this inspection, you have reviewed the school's strategy for improvement and amended it to give greater emphasis to the school's most pressing priorities, which are the key areas for improvement outlined in the previous paragraph.

The results of the 2007 national tests show that the achievement of the Year 6 pupils who left the school in the summer term 2007 was inadequate and their progress was too slow, particularly in English. Standards remained below the national average. The school's 2007 Key Stage 1 assessment results show that standards were well below the national average and continued to decline further. The most recent teacher

assessments for the Year 2 pupils indicate that the downward trend in attainment should be arrested when the pupils are assessed in the national tests in 2008. The school's assessment information shows that during the autumn term 2007 the majority of pupils in Years 2 to 6 made generally satisfactory progress, with some making very good progress. However, there are significant levels of underachievement in Year 2 and Year 5. Overall, almost 30% of pupils are making unsatisfactory progress improving basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy. The rate of progress in writing is still too slow and many pupils continue to repeat errors in grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. Similarly, standards in writing remain below, and sometimes well below, the national average.

Expectations are not high enough. Whilst pupils in some year groups are expected to produce good work that is presented well, this is not a consistent feature in all classes. As a result, pupils experience too much variability as they move through the school. Some classrooms are bright and stimulating, with displays that encourage them to do their best and support their learning. This is not reflected in all classrooms and, in some, the learning environment is uninspiring.

There is a significant weakness in teachers' lesson planning, which is contributing to the slow progress made by too many pupils. Whilst teachers recognise the importance of planning work that is matched to pupils' different ability levels, this is not always translated into specific tasks which provide pupils with sufficient challenge and support to improve their skills and knowledge. Too much of the pupils' work is pitched at the same level of difficulty, which lowers expectations for the more able and does not provide enough structured guidance for the middle and lower ability pupils. There is a lack of clarity about what different groups of pupils are expected to learn and achieve in a lesson and what the next steps in their learning should be. You recognise that this must be tackled with renewed energy and sense of urgency.

The recently introduced systems for analysing assessment information and tracking pupils' progress have the potential to identify areas of underachievement more rapidly than in the past. You and senior teachers have already made a sound start in doing so.

The local authority (LA) is providing a sound range of monitoring, evaluation and support. The recent LA review in November 2007 accurately identified many of the areas for the school's further improvement. Nevertheless, the impact of the LA's work in eliminating the school's weaknesses has been less effective.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrew Watters
Her Majesty's Inspector