

1 October 2008

Mrs S Curley
Headteacher
Castle Hill Primary School
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Dear Mrs Curley

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 September 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I am also grateful to the chair and vice-chair of governors and the local authority (LA) for assistance with this visit.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

As a result of the inspection on 27 and 28 February 2008, the school was asked to:

- raise standards and pupils' achievement in English, mathematics and science
- ensure that children in the Foundation Stage have full access to an outside curriculum
- ensure that all leaders and managers are firmly and effectively focused on driving up standards
- improve attendance so that it is in line with the national average.

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.

The school has responded with urgency to the issues identified at its previous inspection. The headteacher, supported well by senior staff and governors, has shown great resolve in leading the school through a period of much change and disruption. Since her appointment she has provided strong and decisive leadership and has gained the confidence of the school community. In spearheading the school's work she has accelerated the pace of change and taken significant steps to prioritise actions and eliminate inadequate teaching. In doing so, she has successfully ensured that efforts have been clearly focused on raising achievement, creating a positive learning environment and building the capacity of staff. As a

result expectations have been raised, teamwork is improving and staff are increasingly receptive to new ideas. This means that the legacy of underachievement is being tackled more decisively and senior leaders have a sharper focus of how well the school is performing.

Pupils' work in lessons and in their books, together with the school's own assessment information, shows that their progress is beginning to accelerate. This is because the school has successfully introduced several new strategies to improve pupils' achievement, which in turn are leading to improvements in classroom practice. Effective tracking systems have been introduced to identify pupils who are underachieving and those who are capable of working at a higher level. There are clearer expectations of the progress pupils should make each year. Staff are taking greater responsibility for their classroom practice and are held to account. There are regular reviews of how well pupils are progressing. As a result the school is better placed to judge how well pupils are achieving and plan appropriate support. In addition, teachers are gaining confidence in judging the level of pupils' work. They have a much stronger understanding of using assessments to judge what pupils can do and what they need to learn next, although this is not yet consistent in all classes.

The quality of teaching and learning is improving and is increasing the progress pupils make in lessons. The lessons observed during this inspection were at least satisfactory and some were good, none were inadequate. This is because the planning of lessons is more focused on what pupils will learn and opportunities to plan activities for pupils of different abilities are much clearer. Furthermore, the use of success criteria is improving pupils' understanding as staff become more aware of what constitutes effective learning. In the best lessons, pupils are encouraged to test and deepen their understanding with carefully crafted activities that promote high levels of discussion and independent thinking. Tasks are exciting, learning is fun and pupils are given every opportunity to discuss and share their ideas with others. For example, pupils in Year 3 used their initiative and skills of inquiry in investigating the difference between fictional and non-fictional extracts of information. Where teaching is less successful, the range of teaching styles is too narrow, which means that pupils' work is sometimes over-directed. Tasks are less engaging. Pupils are not always encouraged to make decisions about how they learn or to think of different ways to tackle their work.

Procedures for checking on the quality of teaching are much sharper and are having a stronger impact on improving learning. Lesson observations by senior staff increasingly focus on the progress made by pupils and staff are provided with clear targets to improve their practice.

Senior staff and governors are putting the concerns of the past behind them and are keen to move forward to get the school back on track. Individually and as a team, they demonstrate greater confidence, no longer work in isolation and have a clearer understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Their skills and expertise are improving with training and support. Their roles and responsibilities are

clear. As a consequence, senior leaders are more focused on raising achievement and have an increased awareness of the priorities for the school. A common philosophy has been established: leaders talk the same language and have taken ownership of the agenda for improving the school. As one governor commented, 'Everyone is now on the same bus.'

Governance is much improved. Governors continue to deepen their knowledge of the school's performance through regular and timely reports. They are very committed and are becoming increasingly confident in their role as improvement partners by supporting, challenging and holding the school to account.

The school has improved children's access to learning outside the classroom in the Foundation Stage. Planning opportunities are clearer, activities are well thought out and Nursery and Reception children are working more closely together as a group.

Attendance is improving, although it is still below average. The school tries hard to increase parents' awareness of the significance of pupils' absence. It continues to encourage and promote good attendance through: the effective work of the learning mentors; initiatives such as the 'Rise and Shine Club' for pupils at the beginning of the day; rewarding pupils for good attendance with certificates in special assemblies.

The school is well placed to improve further, with the effective support of the LA. The whole-school commitment to improvement and the positive way the school acts upon advice has strengthened its capacity to improve.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Isherwood
Her Majesty's Inspector