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4 December 2008

Ms Sally-Anne Crowther
Headteacher
Thameside Primary School
Cotman Close
Abingdon
OX14 5NL

Dear Ms Crowther

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Thameside Primary School

Following my visit to your school on 19 and 20 November 2008, 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 January 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

This letter and monitoring inspection report 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.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Principal Administrative Officer for Oxfordshire.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Thompson". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

Mike Thompson
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of Thameside Primary School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 19 and 20 November 2008

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, the consultant headteacher working with the school, members of staff with leadership responsibility, members of the governing body including the chair of governors, a group of pupils and the interim head of service from the local authority. The inspector observed teaching in all classes and looked through samples of pupils' work, teachers' planning, monitoring records and tracking data.

Context

There have been significant changes in the organisation of classes and teaching personnel since the first monitoring inspection. There are still five classes but, because of changes in the numbers of pupils in each year group, the pupils are grouped differently. There is one class for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), one for Year 1 and three mixed-age classes for Years 2/3, 4/5 and 5/6. There are also three new teachers, two of whom are class-based. There is a new senior leadership team, comprising the headteacher, the part-time consultant headteacher and a new senior teacher who is not class-based and has been appointed for the duration of the current academic year. There are also new coordinators for each of the three key stages, and there has been a redistribution of subject responsibilities.

Achievement and standards

The provisional results of the most recent national tests, conducted at the end of the summer term in Years 2 and 6, show that standards remain a cause for concern. The school is working hard to improve the situation. At the end of Year 2, the impact of the school's strong focus on reading was seen in a significant improvement in the 2008 results. However, this was offset by a sharp fall in standards in mathematics. Standards in both mathematics and writing were well below average. There was a marked improvement all round at the end of Year 6, as assessment data on entry show that this was a more able group than usual.

Currently, the overall attainment of pupils in Year 2 is close to age-related expectations. This is a positive development and gives the school the possibility of accelerating achievement further. However, the attainment of pupils in Year 6 is well below expectations. This results from the legacy of underachievement over a number of years that continues to be found, particularly among the oldest pupils.

The school's tracking data shows that some of these pupils have made good progress in reading, writing and mathematics, but far too many of them continue to underachieve. The language skills of the underachieving pupils generally remain low

because weaknesses in their knowledge of letter sounds, sentence construction and grammar persist. The school is attempting to address this problem through regular, structured teaching of reading and writing skills, and gains in learning are evident. However, this initiative is not yet underpinned by consistent, clear modelling of good spoken language by teachers and teaching assistants in all lessons, and so the impact of the initiative to improve reading and writing is lessened. Too many pupils continue to struggle to read and understand simple instructions. Standards of handwriting are weak; pupils continue to lack confidence as writers and do not have enough opportunities to practise their skills by writing at length. Pupils' mathematical skills continue to be adversely affected by insecure knowledge of basic functions, such as multiplication tables, which affects the accuracy of calculations. Weaknesses in reading sometimes mean that, when calculations are presented in the form of a problem, some pupils are unable to work out what they have to do independently.

Teachers' marking of work has improved and is beginning to help pupils make progress. Teachers are now applying the 'Tickle Pink and Green to Grow' marking system more consistently and the developmental comments, made in green, provide useful pointers for pupils. However, the marking of the older pupils' work does not pick up on weaknesses in spelling, and these go uncorrected. This situation occurs because marking criteria focus solely on the technical skills, such as phraseology or the use of clauses, taught during the lesson. Greater attention is given to correcting spelling mistakes in pupils' work in Years 2 and 3. In most classes, expectations of the presentation of pupils' work remain too low.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- raise standards and improve progress in English and mathematics in Years 1 to 6 by identifying precisely what pupils need to achieve to advance to the next stage of learning – satisfactory

Quality of provision

The school's continuing strong focus on improving teachers' skills, together with changes in personnel, is resulting in some improvements in pupils' learning. The school's own monitoring, validated by the inspection, shows that teaching and learning are now generally satisfactory or better. In the EYFS and Year 1, teaching is most often good. In all classes there are some good features of teaching. For example, clear established routines help pupils to develop confidence as learners because they have a better idea of what is expected of them. A greater focus is now being placed on ensuring that the pupils know precisely what they are supposed to be learning, and this is reinforced by the new marking system. Where the school's monitoring has identified areas for improvement, well-targeted support is being provided for the teachers concerned. This support is increasingly provided by the new senior teacher, who also has 'advanced skills' status. The school recognises that there remains some way to go to achieve its target of providing teaching that is most often good or better in all classes. Secure foundations are in place in that lessons are carefully planned and the success criteria by which learning is judged are a regular feature. However, these criteria do not yet ensure sufficient challenge for

pupils. This is because, there are weaknesses in assessment. Teachers are not yet skilled enough in assessing their pupils' day-to-day learning across the breadth of the curriculum and rely too much on periodic 'snapshot' testing which is limited to reading, writing and mathematics. Where assessments are made, the National Curriculum sub-levels attained by individuals are clearly identified. However, teachers do not use this information to drive progress forward by linking their learning criteria in lessons to the attainment required to achieve the next sub-level.

Although some progress has been made in developing pupils as independent learners, much remains to be done. The good foundation provided in the EYFS is not yet being developed effectively enough in all classes. Pupils are now used to assessing their own work, albeit in a basic manner, and teachers encourage them to give feedback on their understanding of the tasks set for them and the concepts taught. Elements of choice in learning are beginning to appear. For example, in a Year 5/6 mathematics lesson, pupils were greatly motivated by the opportunity given to them to choose which percentage calculations they would carry out, once they had a grasp of the basics. However, there are many missed opportunities to challenge pupils further, for example, the more able pupils are not provided with more open-ended mathematical and scientific investigations. The 'learned helplessness' of a number of pupils, which the school continues to identify in its self-evaluation, stems from underachievement combined with over-directive support provided by adults. This is in marked contrast to the good levels of independence in learning achieved in the EYFS, where children are able to make sensible choices and routinely take responsibility for organising their chosen activities.

Teaching assistants are being used in a more targeted way, and provide invaluable help for pupils. Their clear teaching of letter sounds to small groups of pupils, for example, is a key element in the initiative to improve standards of reading. However, on some occasions, teaching assistants continue to lead the learning too much and give pupils too little opportunity to think and act for themselves. Overall, the success of the work to improve pupils' independence is beginning to be seen in a growing culture for learning within the school as pupils begin to show a real enjoyment and enthusiasm for their studies.

The systems used to track pupils' progress have yet to be improved so that the underachievement of individuals is flagged up more clearly and realistic targets are set for the older pupils. Although a lot of work has been done to improve the quality of teaching, teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve is not yet high enough. Teachers have become reliant on periodic testing as a gauge of pupils' achievement. Teachers have yet to improve their skills in assessing pupils' performance to ensure that work is routinely challenging and clearly linked to the level they are expected to achieve. In English, assessment information is clearly displayed so that pupils can see what they need to do next to improve further. However, there is no similar system for raising pupils' awareness and motivating them in mathematics or science.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- use day-to-day assessment to set tasks that engage pupils and are well matched to their needs and capabilities – satisfactory
- provide pupils with the skills and opportunities to become independent learners – satisfactory

Leadership and management

The school has yet to develop the capacity to improve and to sustain improvement through its own resources. The headteacher continues to be well supported by her consultant partner, and the senior leadership team has been strengthened by the temporary appointment of a senior teacher. A new, clear leadership structure is in place, although the leadership skills of all staff are not yet developed enough. There has, for example, been no opportunity to develop the roles of the key stage coordinators and much of the development of subject leadership has, necessarily, focused on English and mathematics. In the case of mathematics, the post is currently held on a temporary basis by the senior teacher. Self-evaluation is still mostly undertaken by the headteacher and her consultant partner; however, governors are beginning to become more involved as they develop their roles. The school's action plan sets out a clear agenda for improvement and is regularly adjusted to reflect the evaluations of the monitoring carried out. Although the senior managers' work is beginning to have an impact on standards, they recognise that there is still much more to do.

Governors are improving their skills and are more active in monitoring the work of the school. A new chair of governors is in place, and the governing body is beginning to benefit from the skills provided by a new recruit: the school's former local authority adviser, who is ensuring that governors have a better understanding of the performance of the school. Governors are planning to develop a greater partnership with parents through the re-establishment of some form of home-school association.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- build the capacity of leaders to evaluate accurately the work of the school and to pursue improvement rigorously – satisfactory

External support

The local authority is providing satisfactory support for the school and governing body. The authority is contributing to improving the quality of teaching and learning and is committed to helping develop the role of leaders.