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26 March 2009

Mrs E Shannon
Headteacher
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Highfields
Doncaster
South Yorkshire
DN6 7JE

Dear Mrs Shannon

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Highfields Primary School

Following my visit with Liz Godman, Additional Inspector, to your school on 24 and 25 March 2009, 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 November 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may not be appointed.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Assistant Director, Children and Young People's Services, Education and Inclusion, for Doncaster.

Yours sincerely

Christine Harrison
Additional Inspector

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Highfields Primary School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 24 and 25 March 2009

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, groups of pupils, the Chair of Governors, the school improvement partner and representatives from the local authority.

Context

Following the inspection in November 2008, in which the governance of the school was judged to be inadequate, the local authority has decided to replace the governing body with an interim executive board (IEB): this change is expected to be confirmed soon.

Highfields has recently formed a collaborative partnership with another primary school. The main purpose of this collaboration is to provide support in developing leadership and management skills and enhancing teachers' understanding of how they can help pupils learn more effectively.

Achievement and standards

Standards remain very low and pupils continue to underachieve. The school has some data to suggest that pupils are now making better progress, but this analysis masks the detail of what is happening with different groups of pupils. While some pupils, whose levels of attainment were low in September 2008, have made rapid progress, too many, particularly those who started the year at higher levels, have made no progress. An additional concern is that these data are based on assessments which have often been inaccurate in the past and have not since been fully moderated. The school has introduced 'pupil progress' meetings, which are valuable in providing a detailed review of how well each pupil is doing, together with plans for addressing underachievement. However, these meetings are not as useful as they could be because they are not based on reliable assessment information.

In too many lessons, pupils do not make enough progress. The main reason for this is the quality of teaching, which often does not enable pupils, particularly higher attainers, to learn as quickly as they should. Even in the better lessons, pupils' progress is generally no better than satisfactory and therefore not good enough to compensate for previous underachievement.

Progress since the last inspection on the area for improvement:

- Raise standards and improve achievement for all pupils in all subjects – inadequate

Personal development and well-being

At the time of the last inspection, most aspects of personal development were judged to be satisfactory. It is clear that pupils' behaviour and their attitudes to learning have continued to improve since that time. Attendance has risen and exclusions this year are much lower than previously. Pupils appreciate the improvement in the school's ethos and say how much more they enjoy school now. The calmer atmosphere for learning, which has been established in most lessons, is the main reason why lower attaining pupils are now making better progress. Pupils arrive at lessons wanting to learn. Nevertheless, in some lessons, pupils become restless and lose concentration when the pace of the lesson is slow or the work is too easy or too hard for them.

Quality of provision

Too much inadequate teaching persists and, as a result, pupils' learning remains erratic and inconsistent. Teachers' skills in managing pupils' behaviour have improved and so pupils are increasingly interested and eager to learn. The variety of activities is improving, so that pupils have more opportunities to investigate and to handle practical materials to assist their learning. Although plans for all lessons now refer to what pupils are expected to learn, these intentions continue to be too general in some classes and so pupils are unclear about what they should have learned by the end of the lesson. This limits the rate at which they are learning. Teachers have received training on how to improve their planning and lessons are now planned with the intention of meeting the often wide-ranging needs of pupils in the class. However, the quality of this planning is still too variable to secure the progress of all pupils. For example, sometimes in activities involving the whole class, there is too much challenge for some pupils and so they are confused and miss key steps in their learning. On other occasions, provision for higher attaining pupils does not stretch them sufficiently and they mark time in activities rather than extending their knowledge and understanding. Therefore, in too many lessons, either the whole class, or particular groups of pupils, do not make enough progress.

There are persisting inaccuracies and inconsistencies in assessment. As a result, these assessments continue to provide an unreliable basis on which to plan activities sharply matched to what pupils already know and can do. There has been a big improvement in the marking of pupils' work. Information about how well they have done is now a common feature in pupils' books. However, the extent to which they are given guidance on how to improve their work remains poorly developed. Pupils know their targets in mathematics, but do not have targets for reading and writing. Opportunities for individuals to assess their own learning remain restricted.

There have been some minor improvements to the school's curriculum, particularly in the variety of learning experiences that the pupils have within the classroom, although the use of visits and visitors remains limited. However, the curriculum has not improved sufficiently to meet consistently the needs of those with learning



difficulties and/or disabilities or of the more able pupils. The school's extra-curricular activities have diminished since the inspection in November 2008, but there are plans to reinstate them after Easter 2009. Plans to further develop the curriculum have been put on hold until September 2009.

Progress since the last inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Eradicate inadequate teaching and ensure that assessment information is used to match work to pupils' needs more closely to enable them to learn more effectively – inadequate
- Ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all pupils: through improving the range, challenge and variety of learning activities – inadequate

Leadership and management

The headteacher has a broadly accurate understanding of the school's weaknesses, is open in acknowledging them and has suitable ideas about what needs to be done. However, the school's self-evaluation is not sufficiently rigorous to identify specific weaknesses in detail. There have, for example, been an appropriate number of lesson observations by various people since the last inspection. These observations are recorded in different formats: often they do not give a clear judgement or the judgement does not reflect the comments made. Most contain too much emphasis on what the teacher does rather than on the progress made by pupils in the lesson.

The underlying weakness in leadership and management is a shortage of experience and expertise in leadership. None of the school's leaders have any prior experience in their particular role and almost all are new to the school this year. Some teachers who hold posts of responsibility are not yet sufficiently assured in their own teaching to take on a leadership role, though they have had some recent training. A further problem is the unavoidable delay in the establishment of the IEB. The governing body currently retains responsibility for the school but is not sufficiently skilled to provide the challenge and monitoring that the school requires at this stage.

Progress since the last inspection on the area for improvement:

- Ensure that leaders, managers and governors rigorously monitor all aspects of the school's work and take effective and swift action to remove weaknesses – inadequate

External support

Following the inspection, the local authority submitted its statement of action that was judged to meet requirements. However, several aspects of the plan have not been implemented as planned, partly because they required action by the IEB, which is not yet in place, to monitor the particular actions. Also, some of the targets, for

example, for the expected improvements in teaching, were over-ambitious and unlikely to be met. The local authority has provided some useful support from various consultants, particularly in trying to meet the needs of individual teachers who lacked experience and expertise in aspects of their work. However, the impact of this support has been limited and there is evidence that teachers have, at times, struggled with more advice than they could cope with. The external support for the development of the curriculum in English and mathematics has not had enough impact on pupils' experience and learning. This is due to continuing inconsistencies in how external guidance is understood or used by staff. The recent collaboration with another primary school has been successful in encouraging teachers to improve the learning environment and the use of classroom display. However, there has not been any significant effect on the quality of teaching and learning. Overall, the impact of the external support for the school has been inadequate. It is clear that the school now requires more focused, longer-term support with major aspects of its work, notably leadership and the quality of teaching and learning.

Priorities for further improvement

- The priorities for further improvement continue to be those identified at the school's inspection in November 2008.