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Ms Veronica Fenlon
St Mary and St John Junior and Infant School
Beaufort Road
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Dear Ms Fenlon

Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Mary and St John Junior and Infant School

Following my visit with Ian Jones Additional Inspector, to your school on 02 and 03 December 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in June 2009. 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.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Birmingham local authority and the diocesan office.

Yours sincerely

Ceri Morgan

Her Majesty's Inspector

Special measures: monitoring of St Mary and St John Junior and Infant School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 02 and 03 December 2009

Evidence

The inspectors observed teaching in every class, met with two groups of pupils and representatives from the governing body and the local authority. Separate meetings were held with headteacher, senior leadership team and a middle management group.

Context

The school is a larger than average primary school with a majority of pupils from White British backgrounds. Around a quarter are from a wide range of different heritages. Since the inspection in June 2009, the number on roll has declined slightly and is now just under 400. There has been a significant change in staffing since September 2009 and almost half of the teachers are new to the school this term. In addition to this, others have taken on new roles. This level of change has continued into governance with a new chair appointed in September 2009. Currently the school receives considerable support from external partners, including the local authority and neighbouring schools.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Pupils' outcomes remain inadequate across the school. In the 2009 national tests for pupils aged 11, only around a half of pupils managed to achieve the expected level, a very low proportion, with an average proportion reaching the higher levels in mathematics. In English, 60% achieved the expected levels, which is below average and very few, only 7%, managing the higher levels. Science results were also very low. This bleak picture is also evident for pupils aged seven where the average level of attainment remains well below national levels. Of particular concern is the decline in 2009 in the reading attainment of the youngest pupils. All groups of pupils, irrespective of their background, underachieve. Boys, although performing below expectations do slightly better than the girls.

The school acknowledges that the progress pupils make from age seven to age eleven is also inadequate. In mathematics and science, the progress pupils made between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 was amongst the lowest 3% nationally. Even in English, where progress is slightly better, it was significantly below national levels.

Poor attainment and progress in core literacy skills are continuing barriers to better progress in all subjects. Inadequate reading and writing skills, for example, are common throughout the school.

Particular weaknesses in English include poor standards of handwriting, limited use of spelling strategies, and poor punctuation and grammar, although some of the higher achievers show signs of an improvement in this area. The spoken vocabulary used by pupils is improving as a result of a clearer focus on this in some lessons. During the visit, for example, pupils showed an increased enthusiasm for using more exciting phrases such as a 'toxic sky' to describe a storm, or how a skipping rope in flight moves 'from a smile to a frown'. Sadly, these examples are not commonplace as yet in written text. Presentation is generally poor.

In mathematics, an insecure basic grasp of number skills remains alongside some misconceptions and a fragile ability to apply strategies to solve word problems. A particularly tenuous grasp of multiplication and division facts is striking. Some of the older pupils show only an emerging understanding of fractions and a limited understanding of the vocabulary associated with some aspects of data handling and shape and space.

Despite this bleak picture, there are some very early signs of improvement. In a scrutiny of pupils' workbooks, pupils in Year 6 are now making better progress in mathematics and standards of writing are showing signs of improvement. Presentation skills are improving and the volume of work being produced is more appropriate. This encouraging improvement is more evident in Year 6 than in most other classes.

The school's targets for 2010 remain cautious rather than ambitious. Even if the school manages to achieve their aim, results will still be very low and too few pupils will achieve the required level. The school readily acknowledges there is much still to be done to improve standards of attainment and pupils' progress and has engaged in appropriate support programmes to help tackle this.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and increase the rate of pupils' progress in reading, writing and mathematics across the school – inadequate progress.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The most significant improvement since the last inspection is seen in much better behaviour throughout the school. Behaviour has improved considerably as a result of a consistent application of behaviour management techniques and a clear system of rewards and sanctions. These efforts make lessons more appropriately calm. The majority of pupils are well behaved and polite. They enjoy their lessons and say

themselves that the school is a much calmer place than it used to be. Pupils acknowledge a limited amount of bullying but also say that it isn't a 'real problem' in school. They are very positive about the recent changes. In particular, they appreciate the efforts the teachers are now making on their behalf and are responding with greater enthusiasm for lessons. This change has sown the seeds for a greater engagement in lessons in the future and reflects an appropriate priority for the school which has now been achieved. This bodes well for future capacity to improve.

The school council is new, ambitious for change and wishes to have an impact in school. Its members are especially keen to get seating areas for quiet times at break periods. They have some concerns over aspects of the premises, especially the toilets, which are disappointingly unpleasant for some pupils. The school is aware that a refurbishment of some aspects of their premises is long overdue.

Attendance remains inadequate and levels vary over time. There is a sizeable group of pupils who have very low attendance levels, below 80%. Although the school are aware of this, there are no effective plans to improve the situation. Levels of persistent absence are also significantly higher than national averages.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching overall remains inadequate. Inspectors observed a worrying proportion of teaching that was unsatisfactory across several year groups. No outstanding or good teaching was observed despite flashes of promise in some sessions. There are some consistent failings which prevent teaching from being better than satisfactory.

The main limitations are heavily teacher-led sessions dominated by too much talk from the teacher. Teachers do not place enough emphasis on gauging what pupils are actually learning. The questioning skills of teachers are not effective because pupils' responses are seldom developed or challenged for improvement. Questions too often require only a short, often previously known, answer rather than an opportunity to explore more ambitious thinking. Levels of challenge and expectations of what pupils are able to do remain too low. As a result the pace of learning is slower than desirable.

Lesson structures are often over complex, resulting in an inefficient use of time with frequent changes of activity within one lesson. In too many sessions, the tasks were not sufficiently challenging, lacked sparkle and stimulation and became over complicated. This increases the amount of time pupils spend listening to instructions rather than being actively involved in learning and thus reduces progress, particularly where all pupils are expected to do the same tasks at the same levels. The quality of feedback, both written and spoken, to pupils is variable but improving. Better marking, which now shows pupils what they need to do and their success

criteria, is evident in some year groups. Although helpful, when pupils have not met their targets there is little evidence of follow up guidance being provided.

Teachers' routine planning is variable in quality. The extensive plans prepared for monitoring visits do not reflect the norm, and the norm is much more focussed on aspects of teachers' activity rather than pupils' learning, despite some evidence of change recently. Too often, planning lacks clarity about the purpose and tasks intended. Although planning identifies different expectations for a range of abilities, this is not always implemented in practice. In most classes, all pupils still undertake the same activity at similar levels rather than work that allows for their differing needs.

The curriculum offers limited opportunities for exciting and engaging activity. However, since September the school has reorganised the times of the school day to increase the amount of time given over to literacy and numeracy, which now take place in the mornings. Setting by ability, introduced this term in mathematics, is helping to better match work to the learning needs of pupils, but the rate of progress is still limited because the tasks set are not sufficiently challenging.

Pupils with special educational needs and /or disabilities get regular support from other adults. Learning assistants are always encouraging and ensure pupils make better progress when they work with individual pupils rather than with larger groups. There is a considerable variation in the amount and quality of guidance they receive from the teachers during the lessons and, as a consequence, their impact is not consistently good.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching throughout the school so that it is consistently good or better by ensuring pupils' differing learning needs are met – inadequate progress
- Ensure the school curriculum promotes enjoyment and achievement and better matches the learning needs and interests of all pupils – inadequate progress

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leadership in school has undergone significant change and is currently carried out by many who are new to their role and new to the school. There has been too little time to see the full impact of these changes. Capacity to improve remains limited due to having a small team and the need to appoint other key senior staff.

The headteacher has, in her first year, implemented many significant and much needed changes, including a refocus on pupils' progress. She is ambitious for the

school and has an enthusiastic vision. She has established a full programme of monitoring of teaching and learning under the guidance of external consultants. This is proving invaluable in establishing a clear picture of the school's weaknesses. However, the information is not used in an evaluative sense to improve strategic planning, which remains embryonic. Monitoring of teaching quality occasionally lacks rigour and some of the important school documentation, including the school development plan, lacks precise timelines and actions.

The governors have appointed a new chair with significant experience. They have, in addition to this, implemented new systems and committee structures which offer promise. However, governors have only met on a few occasions. The impact of this change is thus unproven and some governors are not sufficiently involved in driving improvements. As a result the key ingredient of critical evaluation is underdeveloped.

The plans to develop the capacity of the middle leaders are becoming clearer but are at a very early stage. As a consequence, the impact of the leadership team remains limited.

Despite the lack of impact so far, the actions taken and the changes being made are appropriate. There is a new tracking system now in place which is monitored by half-termly meetings about progress, which helps identify those pupils at risk of underachievement. Currently, the school is aware that this shows considerable proportions of pupils at risk of falling behind. The school relies heavily on external consultant support for maintaining capacity at leadership level. Whilst supportive, this has led to a position where the school is in receipt of much good advice which is at risk of becoming confusing, especially at classroom level.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Make sure that leaders and managers, including governors, rigorously monitor and evaluate the work of the school in order to bring about rapid improvement – inadequate progress.

External Support

The school is currently benefiting from extensive and long term support. This is provided by the local authority and other colleagues, including two National Leaders of Education who are themselves headteachers from neighbouring schools. There is a new School Improvement Partner and frequent collaborative work from expert classroom practitioners and consultants. Involvement in a programme of intensive support is also welcomed by the school. This support has enabled the school to make some inroads into their weaknesses but it is too early to judge the overall impact and the wide range of external advice and support is showing signs of becoming complex and confusing to the school. The statement of action produced by the local authority is a helpful template for action and, having secured some

significant change, all external partners are now rightly committed to a review of the impact of their actions.

Priorities for further improvement

- Simplify lesson planning to secure clearer learning objectives.
- Refine and utilise the extensive support available to the school by establishing clearer accountability structures.
- Increase pupils' engagement in their learning so that they are more routinely involved in stimulating and challenging activities and take a greater role in assessing their own performance.
- Increase the focus on core literacy skills in all subjects and lessons.