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Mrs Abigail Birch
Aylesham Primary School
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Dear Mrs Birch

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 25 May and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please pass on my thanks to your staff, the Chair of Governors, School Improvement Partner and pupils who made time to meet with me during the day.

As a result of the inspection on 1-2 October 2009 the school was asked to:

Raise standards and accelerate the progress that pupils make, especially in Year 6, by:

- raising teachers' expectations of the pace and the quality of pupils' work
- monitoring teaching rigorously to focus more clearly on the pace of pupils' learning
- improving the overall quality of teaching so that at least 80% is good or better by July 2010
- involving pupils more in assessing their own work and in devising targets which will show them more clearly how to improve
- ensuring that the revised curriculum increases pupils' enjoyment of, and commitment to, their learning, and emphasises links between subjects more clearly.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the pupils' achievement.

A key reason why the school has made good progress in addressing the areas for improvement is because senior leaders have galvanised staff to drive up the quality of teaching and learning, most of which is now good. This has resulted in higher expectations of, and aspirations for, all pupils and has helped staff to work together to focus intensively upon what constitutes good learning in every lesson. The school's own regular monitoring of teaching, learning walks by senior leaders to examine pupils' work, and observations by external consultants, such as the School Improvement Partner, verify that good teaching is raising attainment and accelerating progress for most groups of pupils.

A consistent feature of the school's good teaching is effective use of questioning to probe pupils' knowledge and understanding and check their learning. Developing pupils' critical thinking skills as part of the revised curriculum is enhanced by such good questioning. Targeted questioning encourages less confident pupils to contribute to discussion. Pupils in Years 3 to 6 are increasingly involved in assessing their own work and now have greater capacity to analyse their work because they understand targets and success criteria. Most pupils speak positively about their targets. They say they are working harder and know how well they are doing. All pupils steadily develop skills for peer assessment as well as self-assessment. Behaviour is good and supports good progress in lessons.

The pace of lessons is often brisk and most are planned carefully to match learning to the pupils' needs. However, lower-attaining pupils are not always sufficiently challenged and teachers are still acquiring skills in planning and matching work to meet the needs of lower- as well as higher-ability pupils. Electronic whiteboards and other audio visual resources are used well in teaching and pupils comment that this helps them to understand their lessons much more because lessons include practical tasks. Senior leaders have supported staff in reviewing how to improve their marking. Inspection evidence confirms that most marking helps pupils understand how to improve and work towards targets. The school has rightly accepted that high-quality marking needs to be deeply embedded in day-to-day practice so that every pupil has a detailed understanding of how to improve, not just what to improve.

The student council met with the inspector and reported that pupils were happy at school and that pupils know changes are taking place to help them enjoy their learning. They particularly value topic work that links different areas of learning together. Pupils keenly showed the inspector some artwork that linked the study of a particular artist to science and caring for the environment. In a highly successful lesson, pupils were competently able to discuss the pros and cons of locating mobile phone base stations near a school and their alleged impact on health and the environment. Good group debate showed sound knowledge from the previous lesson and pupils drew upon their mathematical knowledge and understanding of moral and social issues.

Good teaching has helped all staff start to embed the new, more creative and practical curriculum. The sequencing of units across the curriculum in each year group helps pupils learn how to use core skills in numeracy, literacy and information and communication technology in topic-based work. Lessons include much investigative work and pupils learn well in pairs and groups, and some acquire much better independent learning skills. The school has worked effectively to ensure that a new culture about learning is helping pupils understand why every lesson counts in their progress.

The school is now turning around inadequate progress and underachievement. Current school data shows that pupils are quickly gaining lost ground in their learning and early indications show that results at the end of Year 2 will be significantly above those of 2009 and likely to exceed the national average. Attainment is set to rise in Year 5 and 6, although it is likely to still be just below the national average in English in 2010 for Year 6. Progress of Year 5 pupils is rapidly improving as is progress in reading for Year 4. Marked improvements are evident in attainment in mathematics in each year group and the school places considerable emphasis on improving pupils' writing. While there is some progress in raising attainment in writing, this remains a key target for the school's continued improvement.

The local authority's statement of action provides an insightful strategy for improvement and fulfils requirements. The local authority support has been unwavering and has created partnership working between staff and advisers to regularly consolidate progress in teaching and keep the school moving forward. Teaching staff and leaders have been highly receptive to support and guidance and use this diligently to plan changes both in the curriculum and in lesson planning. The impact of actions taken is securing more cohesive and systematic change that is sustainable and not reliant on quick fixes. The lively change to the culture of the school is testament to this.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your school. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Joanna Beckford-Hall
Her Majesty's Inspector