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17 June 2011

Mr Andrew Brown
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Brown

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Higham Ferrers Junior School

Following my visit to your school on 15 June 2011, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in October 2010. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection are set out in the annex to this letter. 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. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Northamptonshire.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2010

- Improve attainment and progress in English and mathematics by:
 - simplifying and making sure that processes for assessing the progress of pupils are accurate, valid, regularly completed, and enable the progress of individual pupils from Years 3 to 6 to be shown easily; using this information to identify and remedy underachievement
 - developing teachers' expertise in mathematics
 - ensuring pupils take pride in presenting written work to a high standard, are productive throughout all lessons and improve basic numeracy by learning their times tables up to 12 by the end of Year 4.

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning by:
 - developing teachers' expertise in information and communication technology and its use as a tool to motivate and help pupils assess their own learning
 - making sure that pupils fully understand what they are required to learn in lessons, are given more independent, challenging work and their learning is checked by the end of the lesson
 - ensuring that marking and target setting are used effectively to enable pupils to understand fully what they need to do to attain higher standards
 - sharing the good practice already present in the school to help eliminate the current inconsistency.

- Improve the impact that leadership and management has on the quality of education provided by:
 - rigorously monitoring the learning of pupils of all abilities in the classroom and making sure that teaching is fully meeting their needs
 - consistently demonstrating and promoting high standards in all aspects of provision, and expecting equally high standards in all outcomes for all pupils in all classes
 - developing the roles of the newly appointed literacy and numeracy coordinators
 - improving the role of the governing body in holding the school to account for its standards.

Special measures: monitoring of Higham Ferrers Junior School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 15 June 2011

Evidence

The inspector observed the school's work, including 14 lessons and scrutinised documents, including pupils' work, progress and attainment data, subject reports from the mathematics and literacy coordinators, the school's single central record of adults who work or volunteer in the school, and the minutes of governing body meetings and of the Progress Evaluation Group. The inspector met with the headteacher and other senior leaders, the mathematics and literacy coordinators, the advanced skills teacher, the special educational needs coordinator, groups of staff and pupils, members of the governing body and representatives of the local authority.

Context

Since the last monitoring visit in March 2011, one of the Year 6 teachers has remained on sick leave and another Year 6 teacher has left the school. A new teacher has taken over her class. A Year 3 teacher has also been on sick leave since shortly after the last visit. Her class is being taught by a long-term supply teacher. Two teachers have resigned with effect from the end of the summer term and the school has recruited two new and experienced teachers to replace them from September.

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

Pupils' learning and progress in lessons has improved since the last visit. In most classes, pupils are more productive in their writing and better at applying their mathematical skills. Progress was good or better in half of the 14 lessons observed, and inadequate in only one. Consequently, while there are the usual variations among individual pupils, progress so far this year is better overall than in the corresponding period last year.

Year 6 pupils have now taken the national tests for the end of Key Stage 2. Their improved progress means that they have caught up some of the ground they lost in previous years. However, pupils' attainment in Year 6 remains well below average, particularly in mathematics, where progress since joining the school is inadequate. This is recognised by the school, and teachers are working intensively with these pupils to help them catch up further before they transfer to secondary school.

The other year groups do not have the same legacy of underachievement. Pupils in Year 3 are a little behind their targets, following an initial dip in their attainment on joining the school. The current Years 4 and 5 also made slower progress in Year 3,

but have more than made up the lost ground. They are currently exceeding the targets the school has set.

Despite the more positive picture, there are still some groups of pupils where specific issues remain. In writing, for example, boys are making slower progress than girls. On the other hand, girls are achieving less well than boys in mathematics. Progress is also slower for the small group of pupils who are known to be entitled to free school meals.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve attainment and progress in English and mathematics – satisfactory.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils' behaviour in lessons and their attitudes to learning have improved since the last visit, though there are still some issues in Year 3, where pupils are not always willing to listen or to follow instructions straight away. In the lessons observed, behaviour was outstanding in four and good in another eight, with pupils showing creativity and asking sensible questions. Pupils are inquisitive and keen to learn. They say that lessons have become more enjoyable and that teachers are giving them a clearer sense of what they are supposed to be learning. They feel that any misbehaviour usually involves just a few pupils and that most teachers handle this well by following the school's behaviour policy.

Pupils are taught about cyber-safety and how to resist negative peer pressure. They feel safe in school because bullying is rare. They know how to report any problems and feel that their concerns are acted upon promptly.

The effectiveness of provision

There is clear evidence of improvement in teaching. The school has worked hard to eliminate inadequate teaching and to address weaknesses identified in the first monitoring visit. As a result, every teacher who was observed in the previous visit gave a better lesson when observed this time. Lessons have a clearer structure, in which previous work is reviewed and new ideas are introduced and explored. This culminates in individual or group work in which pupils apply and record their new knowledge. More teachers are keeping their introductions brief and well focused so that pupils get more time to work independently. Pupils experience a wider range of activities, such as writing three things remembered from the previous lesson, discussing ideas with talk partners, responding to teachers' questions on mini-whiteboards, engaging in practical work, listing key facts and words, watching video clips and making notes, taking part in role play, and explaining their work to the class. As pupils move to independent work, teachers and teaching assistants often

take the opportunity to focus on small groups who need extra support or challenge. Most now check on the other pupils periodically to ensure that all are making worthwhile progress.

Teachers continue to develop their skills in making accurate assessments, especially in mathematics and literacy. They are also better at using assessment information to plan subsequent lessons and to adapt work for pupils who are at different stages of learning. Marking is regular and teachers often set pupils a target, ask them a probing question or indicate work to be corrected. Increasingly, pupils are given time during lessons and at the beginning of the day to read and respond to teachers' comments, but this is not consistent practice. Electronic teaching resources are used more often. For example, short video clips were used in some lessons, while in others a visualiser was used so that a pupils' work could be projected onto the whiteboard while the pupils explained their answers.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning – good

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leadership and management are improving at all levels. The availability of assessment and progress data on every pupil means that senior and middle leaders quickly identify any individual pupils or groups of pupils who are not making enough progress, intervening as necessary. Teachers and senior leaders refer to this data in assessing their own effectiveness and that of the school.

Regular lesson observation has helped leaders to identify the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and in pupils' work, making the school less reliant on external evaluation. Its improvement work is more tightly focused on specific developments, such as those mentioned in the sections above. The mathematics and literacy coordinators draw together lesson observation, work scrutiny and assessment data to evaluate the impact of the changes they are leading.

At the time of the last inspection, the school was confusing special educational needs with underachievement, so that many pupils were wrongly identified. It now understands the distinction and is able to focus its special educational needs provision on a smaller group while supporting underachieving pupils in other ways. However, the special educational needs coordinator has not been asked to emulate the core subject leaders in providing regular progress reports.

The most successful change for the school has been in its approach to professional development. The strategy has been to get teachers to take charge of their own learning and to support them through peer coaching and 'open door' sessions, where

teachers watch a colleague who is particularly skilled at an aspect of teaching. In peer coaching, teachers are paired with colleagues who have complementary skills. The teachers work together to learn from each other, and each teacher maintains a personal learning log. The advanced skills teacher has played an important role in helping teachers to develop their skills in peer coaching.

The governing body has become much more effective. Following training, governors have a better understanding of school performance data. Committee chairs now ensure that proceedings are businesslike. Members of the governing body visit more often to get a first-hand view of the school's work. As a result, senior leaders are questioned more rigorously and from a more informed point of view.

The increasing impact of leadership and management is evident in better teaching and better pupil progress over the last two terms. However, the improvements to date are not secure. They need to be embedded, sustained and supplemented with other improvements. There are still as many satisfactory as good lessons and some groups are still not achieving the expected rates of progress in all subjects. Nevertheless, the positive response of teachers to the professional development strategy is promising. Staff morale is strong and there is a shared determination to succeed.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- improve the impact that leadership and management has on the quality of education provided – satisfactory.

External support

The impact of external support is satisfactory. Training from the local authority has helped the governing body to work more effectively. The school has received further support from local authority advisers, covering mathematics, literacy, information and communication technology and provision for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The headteacher and deputy headteacher have visited schools locally that have particularly good practice and Year 3 teachers have met with their colleagues in the neighbouring infant school to develop a better mutual understanding of assessment. The local authority continues to evaluate the impact of its work effectively through its Progress Evaluation Group.