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15 July 2014

Mr Stuart Gallimore
Director of Children's Services
East Sussex County Council
County Hall
St Annes Crescent
Lewes
East Sussex

Dear Mr Gallimore

Inspection of local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement under section 136(1) (b) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

Following the recent inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors on 9-13 June 2014, I am writing on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

We are grateful to you for your cooperation, and to your staff, the Chief Executive, Leader of the Council, the Lead Member for Learning and Effectiveness, contracted partners, headteachers and governors who gave up their time to meet with us¹.

This inspection was carried out because of concerns about:

- the decline in the proportion of primary schools judged good or better for their overall effectiveness and the significantly higher-than-average proportion judged inadequate
- the low attainment and progress of pupils in primary schools from 2011 to 2013
- the wider-than-average gap between the achievements of pupils known to be entitled to free school meals and other pupils across all key stages
- the much lower-than-average proportion of 18 year olds successfully moving on to education, training or employment.

Summary findings

The local authority arrangements for supporting school improvement are ineffective.

¹ During the inspection, discussions were held with senior and operational officers, elected members of the Local Authority, governors and other stakeholders. Inspectors scrutinised available documents, including strategic plans, and analysed a range of available data.

- Too many primary-aged pupils in East Sussex attend schools that are not good enough and around 10% attend schools judged to be inadequate. This is much higher than average. The proportion of inadequate schools is also well above average.
- Over the past three years, a significantly lower-than-average proportion of pupils attained the expected levels in reading, writing and mathematics in Key Stages 1 and 2. Standards in English and mathematics are too low across both key stages.
- The gap in progress made by pupils known to be entitled to free school meals and their peers across all age groups is too wide. Too many primary-aged pupils are ill-prepared for secondary school.
- Too few older students attain Level 3 qualifications; the proportion of 18 year olds moving on successfully to education, training or employment is too low.
- The local authority's 2012 strategy to raise standards included facilitating autonomous 'alliances of schools. This strategy failed to: improve school leadership, including governance; reduce the proportion of inadequate primary schools; stem the decline of good schools; or raise the achievement of pupils across the primary phase.
- Challenge and support to schools to reduce exclusions have not been effective in lowering the above-average proportion of permanent exclusions in primary and secondary schools, or the high proportion of fixed-term exclusions in these and special schools.
- Essential information and guidance about an individual school's performance is received too late in the year by governors. It replicates information already published nationally but is not summarised in a way to ensure governors have a clear external evaluation of their particular school's strengths and areas of concern. This hinders them in challenging underachievement quickly and robustly.
- Systems to monitor the impact of school improvement services' staff do not work consistently well. For example, notes of visit to schools do not routinely say what school leaders should improve or how they will be held to account for their actions. In plans for work with schools, success measures are too often not focused sharply on the difference the actions identified will make. As a result, it is not sufficiently clear if they are working.
- Headteachers report improving relationships with, and strengthening leadership of, the local authority. However, support for the council's plans for improving schools is not yet universal among those who need to be involved, such as some school leaders.

There are a number of strengths in East Sussex.

- The proportion of secondary and special schools judged good at their most recent Ofsted inspection is significantly above average; as is the proportion of outstanding special schools.
- The impact of the Virtual School headteacher's challenge and support to schools can be seen in the above-average achievements of looked-after children.
- Initiatives like the 'Village School' in the Early Years Foundation Stage, where private, voluntary or independent settings are working closely with local schools, is helping to prepare children for school more effectively and improve the quality of provision.

- Partnership with agencies to secure sufficient, suitable provision for school leavers post-16 enabled a higher-than-average proportion in 2013 to participate in their chosen education or training. Well above average proportions of students who attend further education colleges and sixth forms now access good provision.

The local authority arrangements for school improvement require re-inspection in 12 months.

Context

A two-tier primary and secondary system comprises 153 primary, 26 secondary and ten special schools. Of these, 14 secondary, nine primary and one special school are academies. There is a free school (4-18) and a studio school (14-19). Alternative provision placements for secondary-aged permanently excluded pupils have been devolved to four behaviour and attendance partnerships led by four secondary schools. There are 242 early years settings. Most are private, voluntary or independent with 15 nursery classes in primary schools. Post-16 provision comprises two further education colleges, one land-based college, a sixth form college and eight school sixth forms. The Director of Children's Services was appointed in April 2014, following interim arrangements since May 2013. Changes to the structure of school improvement services saw reduced staffing in 2011. The Assistant Director, Schools, Youth and Inclusion Support oversees two full time equivalent Heads of Education Improvement, 15 managers and 10 advisers. Ten commissioned primary consultants and four consultant secondary headteachers provide extra capacity. Since September 2012, the local authority has encouraged the development of 19 local alliances of schools. It intends to move to seven formal area groups of primary, secondary and special schools by September 2015.

Areas for improvement

- Halt the decline in primary school performance and accelerate the pace of improvement, so that inspection outcomes are at least in line with the national averages by summer 2015.
- Identify and communicate unequivocally to underperforming schools that their rate of improvement is not good enough and follow through with robust monitoring.
- Ensure every school has high calibre leadership and governance and rapidly increase the number of effective leaders in primary schools, through pursuing key local authority strategies such as school-to-school support.
- Systematically monitor the impact of support and intervention provided by school improvement services, holding managers to account more effectively for the quality of the provision.
- Rapidly improve and sustain high attainment in English and mathematics by the end of all key stages, especially for pupils known to be eligible for free school meals.

- Ensure all learners have successful transitions between the phases of education training or employment to age 19, and sharply improve Level 3 attainment.
- Provide strong strategic leadership and challenge to schools to support the reduction of temporary exclusions across all types of schools.
- Provide all governing bodies with timely information and guidance to enable them to evaluate how well their school is performing and provide informed challenge to school leaders.

Corporate leadership and strategic planning

- The council's decision to reduce funding and take a 'hands-off' approach to challenging and supporting schools in 2011 reduced the quality of provision in, and the leadership of, primary schools. Following disappointing school test results in 2012, elected members initiated a review of the local authority's performance and, after significant consultation with schools and partners, developed the 'Excellence for All' strategy, which they began implementing in autumn 2013.
- The strategy provides an ambitious vision for improvement, with corporate, political and service leaders wanting to ensure every learner achieves well and attends a good school. However, the impact of this strategy on weak progress and leadership in primary schools, raising standards in English and mathematics and reducing temporary exclusions or improving the outcomes for pupils entitled to free school meals, is only now starting to show some improvement including the sharp two-year rise in the numbers of inadequate primary schools beginning to be reversed. Initial indications also suggest improvement in achievement in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stages 1 and 2 this year.
- The council's ambitions and the sharper focus on improvement are generally understood and welcomed by headteachers and governors. The evidence of improving relationships with the local authority is clear. However, a significant minority of headteachers and governing bodies do not share the local authority's ambition, which is slowing the rate of improvement in some schools.
- Elected members have increased their scrutiny of school improvement services by adding an Education Performance Panel alongside the Scrutiny Committee and the quarterly monitoring of service plans. The panel is too recently set up to have had a significant impact, but its headteacher representatives are positive about the challenge being brought to bear on Early Years Foundation Stage outcomes.
- Elected members, corporate and senior officers receive detailed information about the strengths and weaknesses in the performance of schools and the work of services. However, the reports on services focus on whether actions have been completed, rather than on their impact. This impedes holding services to account for their work.
- Partnership working to secure sufficient, suitable provision for Year 11 school leavers is paying dividends; an above-average proportion of the 2013 cohort is participating in education or training. Improvements in further education provision now ensures the significant majority of students attend good provision.

- The proportion of young people achieving Level 3 qualifications, however, is still too low. Until very recently, the partnership's focus was not firmly enough on the support for 18 year olds, and the proportion moving successfully on to training or employment remains well below average. The local authority has rightly commissioned new contractors to tackle this.

Monitoring, challenge, intervention and support

- The impact of local authority monitoring, challenge, intervention and support has been ineffective overall because there has been an increase in the proportion of primary schools requiring improvement or judged to be inadequate.
- Until this academic year, senior officers did not use information on school performance well enough to tackle concerns at an early stage.
- This has started to improve, with sharper intelligence-sharing between leaders of the school improvement service and services for governors, financial audit and human resources.
- School leaders receive detailed, timely reviews of their pupils' performance. However, reviews for governors arrive too late in the year and are not presented clearly. This hinders governors' understanding of their school's strengths and areas for development and weakens their ability to challenge school leaders.
- Headteachers report that through the 'Excellence for All' strategy, the challenge to schools has been more rigorous, with improved deployment of staff and intervention in schools causing concern. School improvement leaders accept that, until recently, the service was reactive rather than proactive; meaning it was unable to tackle weaknesses quickly or avoid a decline in the number of good schools.
- Once schools are identified as requiring improvement or inadequate, Ofsted's monitoring shows that the school improvement service, in most cases, provides effective support and challenge. However, service reports do not always explain clearly to underperforming schools what leaders need to do and what difference they need to show. Follow-up visits do not routinely report on whether the rate of improvement is sufficient.
- Support for vulnerable 16 to 17 year olds is strong. For example, the employment and care to work strategy, the strategy to develop employability skills, a supported employment programme, residential provision, and funding for travel to remove barriers to participation, all contribute positively to the experience of this group of older learners.

Support and challenge for leadership and management (including governance)

- The local authority had a clear rationale for developing school-to-school support through alliances. However, choosing to facilitate rather than lead developments resulted in unevenness in the alliances' effectiveness, as well as a lack of focus on

improvement in some and a paucity of good leadership in others. Too many headteachers do not have a clear understanding of their alliance's purpose.

- The process of transition, from the 19 alliances to seven area groups, each led by a consultant headteacher, has yet to be explained to schools. Leaders are unclear about who will check that these arrangements make an impact. In addition, these groups will not be fully operational until September 2015. This is too slow for the primary sector.
- There are too few good or outstanding primary leaders locally to promote good practice. Until very recently there has been only one teaching school, two national leaders of education and one national leader of governance. Capacity has been enhanced with three more teaching schools and four national leaders of education.
- The local authority's use of statutory powers to intervene in schools causing concern has not been effective and has only recently begun to stem the decline in primary schools. The use of formal warning notices has been limited. Recent actions, such as removing delegated powers from one primary school, deploying additional governors to a number of weaker governing bodies and informal warning letters to schools, show the authority is beginning to act more urgently. Nevertheless, these actions and others, such as replacing governing bodies with Interim Executive Boards, are often in response to Ofsted judgements rather than used proactively to prevent such judgements being necessary.
- The Chief Executive, lead members and senior staff have fostered largely effective relationships with academies. Local authority leaders have robust discussions when there are concerns about an academy's performance. However, there is too long a delay in contacting the Department for Education when concerns arise, such as the growth in fixed-term exclusions attributed to some primary academies.

Use of resources

- The local authority's use of resources is ineffective, notably in improving primary schools' effectiveness.
- Decision-making is based on thorough reviews of school need, but there is a lack of clarity about how to hold school improvement services to account for the impact of centrally held funds. There is no mechanism to indicate whether funding is above, below or similar to national averages for schools. This makes it difficult to evaluate the impact or value for money of the local authority's work.
- Budget-setting is open and transparent with the School Forum playing an active role. Discussion is collaborative and a good representation of schools, including academies, means the views of headteachers, bursars, school finance managers and governors are heard when allocating money. Resources allocated to schools are checked properly by the finance team against priorities in school development plans.

- School leaders are held to account effectively by the local authority for surplus budgets and plans are checked after two years to ensure planned savings have been used appropriately for building programmes or growth in staffing. Deficit budgets give rise to timely formal audits and successful recovery within the three years expected.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State and the Leader of East Sussex Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Farrow
Her Majesty's Inspector