



18 July 2005

Mrs R Allen
Headteacher
Reading Girls' School
Northumberland Avenue
Reading
Berkshire
RG2 7PY

Dear Mrs Allen

Implementation of Reading Girls School's Action Plan

Following the visit of Mr R Blatchford HMI and Mrs C Bolton HMI to your school on 4 and 5 July 2005, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings which are recorded in the attached note.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures. The focus of the inspection was to assess: the quality of the action plan; the pupils' standards of attainment and their progress; the quality of education provided; the leadership and management of the school; the pupils' attitudes and behaviour; and the progress that has been made in implementing the action plan.

The school's action plan is satisfactory.

The LEA's statement of action is good.

The school has made limited progress since being subject to special measures.

The LEA's target date of December 2006 for the removal of special measures is realistic.

The school is permitted to appoint newly qualified teachers.

I am copying this letter and the note of the inspection findings to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education and Community Services for Reading. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid
Head of Institutional Inspections and Frameworks Division

IMPLEMENTATION OF READING GIRLS SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN

Findings of the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures

During the visit 24 lessons or parts of lessons, two registration sessions and an assembly were inspected. Years 11 and 13 were not in school. Meetings were held with the headteacher, nominated staff, the school council, the chair of governors and representatives from the LEA. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and with pupils and samples of work were examined. A range of documents was scrutinised. Using this evidence, HMI made the following observations to the headteacher, the chair of the governing body and representatives from the LEA.

The governors' action plan has been drawn up in response to the section 10 inspection of February 2005. The plan responds to the inspection report's areas for improvement by bringing these together sensibly under two key headings: teaching and learning, and leadership and management. The plan identifies who among the staff and governing body is responsible for monitoring and evaluation, although the nominated person is not always appropriate for the particular action; some of the timelines for implementing key actions are being suitably reviewed, as are the senior team's various accountabilities. Success criteria are appropriately focused and measurable.

The LEA's commentary provides a useful analysis of the turbulence faced by the school in recent years and months, and makes a number of constructive points to support and develop the school's action plan. In particular, the commentary rightly records that improving the capacity for leadership and management is essential to secure and sustain improvements; furthermore, that in order to implement the action plan successfully, leadership will need to be very good. The commentary notes that significant investment is required, 'ideally to replace but otherwise to improve the accommodation', the source of which the local authority cannot currently identify. The LEA's statement of action lists a series of actions, responsibilities, resources and success criteria which complement satisfactorily the school's action plan. These actions include an immediate strengthening of the senior leadership team and providing relevant training to the governing body.

In the 2004 Key Stage 3 results, 83 per cent of the pupils achieved a Level 5 or above in English, 64 per cent in mathematics, and 62 per cent in science. When set against national benchmarks for all schools, the girls' performance is well above average in English, well below in mathematics, and below in science. The percentages of the pupils achieving the higher Level 6 or above were 42 per cent, 39 per cent, and 30 per cent respectively. The trend in the school's average National Curriculum points for the core subjects was broadly in line with the national trend. The overall value-added measure between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 indicates progress well above the national average. When compared with schools in similar contexts, the percentage of the pupils achieving Level 5 or

above is well above in English, in line with the average in science, and below average in mathematics.

In 2004 at GCSE, 33 per cent of the pupils achieved five or more A*-C grades, well below the national average and that of schools in similar contexts. The figures for those achieving five or more A*-G grades, 79 per cent, and for those achieving at least one A*-G grade, 91 per cent, were similarly well below national averages. The measure of progress made by the pupils between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 is well below average in comparison with national distribution. There were significant variations in the pupils' performances in different subjects of the curriculum.

The school's current predictions indicate that in the 2005 GCSE examinations approximately 40 per cent of the cohort will achieve five or more higher grade passes. A suitable number of measures has been taken to raise the pupils' attainment in external tests and examinations. These have included additional teaching outside the school day and in holiday time, the use of mentors to support targeted pupils, the provision of revision guides and the abolition of study leave, maximising the amount of teaching time available for Year 11 classes. If the current predictions are realised, the school acknowledges that there will be limited improvement in the progress measures for Key Stage 4. At Key Stage 3, unvalidated results in mathematics and in science indicate that the school's targets for both subjects were missed, but that the proportion of pupils achieving the higher levels in science has improved significantly on the corresponding figure for 2004.

In 17 of 24 lessons the teaching was at least satisfactory, and in six it was good. The most successful lessons were well planned, with clear and focused learning objectives, and tasks and resources matched to the pupils' needs and attainment. At best, the teachers' use of questioning was challenging, prompted a good standard of discussion and was well used to assess the pupils' understanding at appropriate stages of the lesson. Key subject vocabulary was modelled by staff, with a clear expectation that pupils would follow suit. The pupils' behaviour was managed well, with timely intervention to ensure that chatter and other forms of low-level distraction were stopped before they could hinder the learning. In one lesson, the very difficult behaviour of an individual was dealt with by the teacher with a skilled balance of authority and encouragement, with the result that the pupil eventually re-engaged with the work. The teachers' subject knowledge was secure in the great majority of cases. Interactive whiteboards were well used in some lessons.

There were numerous weaknesses in the teaching. Lesson plans did not always make use of assessment to ensure that the tasks and resources took account of the pupils' differing needs. Some plans identified learning objectives which were in reality tasks rather than the knowledge, skills and understanding the pupils were expected to acquire as a result of completing them. In some instances, there was undue tolerance of the pupils' chatter and calling out of answers to questions. In a

number of lessons in which behaviour was generally satisfactory, there were no effective strategies to ensure that diffident pupils took an active part in lessons and to assess their understanding. In one practical lesson, two pupils listened to personal stereo equipment and talked at length about their music rather than about the work they were expected to complete.

Where support staff were present in lessons, their contribution was often limited, and in whole-class oral work some did little more than listen passively; the precise role of teaching assistants was rarely specified on lesson plans. While technical resources were often well used, the text on overhead slides was not always clearly legible from the back of classrooms. Marking was very uneven in quality; in too many books it was cursory and ignored important mistakes in the spelling of key vocabulary. Poor standards of presentation were tolerated and pupils defaced their exercise books or left pieces of work incomplete. The use of written feedback for pupils on ways of improving their future writing is underdeveloped. Spirited questioning was well used in the best lessons; in others, answers were often taken from volunteers and the pupils were allowed to contribute briefly and in partial sentences so that opportunities to improve their thinking skills through discussion were missed.

Assessment procedures and practices are erratic. The school has a range of assessment data relating to the pupils' prior and current attainment, but this information is not used consistently when the teachers are planning lessons, resources and schemes of work for the pupils of different abilities. The school has not recognised the vital importance of effective assessment practice to raise the pupils' attainment.

The pupils' progress was at least satisfactory in 17 of the 24 lessons, and good in only four. Higher attaining pupils tended to make good progress as a result of effective teaching, but also because of their diligence and eagerness to learn. While pupils across the attainment range were often industrious and co-operative, many had limited learning skills; they found difficulty in working independently and in collaborating purposefully in small groups. There were gaps in their prior learning which inhibited progress. A key weakness in a number of lessons was the unduly low expectations by staff of the pupils' achievement. Work in the pupils' books and in display indicated that time had been wasted in colouring and drawing in subjects in which there were no worthwhile learning outcomes from such activities. Homework diaries contained entries which indicated that none had been set on too many occasions; pupils were either not recording their homework systematically or its use is uneven. Some of the tasks which were set lacked interest and challenge.

The school has taken appropriate steps to broaden the curricular offer in order to ensure that it meets more fully the needs of the pupils. New vocational courses have been introduced in Key Stage 4 and the school reports a good response from the present Year 9. A partnership has developed with a local university to increase the flexibility of the curriculum, and a programme of Enterprise Education is now in

the initial stages of implementation. In Key Stage 4, three modern foreign languages are offered but pupils with an aptitude in this area are unable to study in school a second modern language before Year 10.

The pupils' behaviour and attitudes were satisfactory or better in 19 lessons; they were good or very good in 12 lessons. Systems for rewarding and praising the pupils for their achievements are at an early stage of development. The pupils' planners reflect both outstanding and poor attitudes to their school work. The planners have not been harnessed to raise the profile among the pupils of the value of personal organisation and self-assessment in lifting attainment.

Around the school, at break-times and lunchtimes, the pupils' behaviour was generally satisfactory, although some pupils dropped litter carelessly and were unnecessarily boisterous in their movement between classes. During one afternoon registration, a small group of pupils was smoking within the school grounds. Punctuality to registration sessions and lessons was variable; time with tutors was not always spent productively. There have been 94 fixed-term exclusions and four permanent exclusions this academic year; the level of fixed-term exclusions is high and above last year's figure. The pupils' attendance was 90.1 per cent for the 2003-2004 academic year. For 2004-2005 to date, the pupils' attendance was recorded by the school as 90.9 per cent, below the national expectation for secondary schools. On the first day of the monitoring visit, attendance in Years 7 to 10 was 87.2 per cent. Attendance was generally better in sets of the higher attaining pupils.

Parts of the school buildings, including classrooms, corridors, stairwells and common areas, present a bleak environment for teaching and learning. While some plans for improvements exist, the school has not taken a sufficiently critical and urgent look at how some areas could be readily improved for the well-being of the pupils and staff alike. While there are some examples of good quality display around the school, the display in classrooms does not consistently provide high quality exemplars of the pupils' work. It is often poorly mounted and opportunities are missed to raise the pupils' aspirations and expectations of their own performance.

Leadership and management at all levels are of variable quality. The headteacher recognises the strengths and weaknesses in the school's current provision. Her evaluation of progress made by the school since February 2005 is accurate; it identifies emerging plans and initiatives, but does not evaluate fully the impact of the actions taken on the pupils' achievement. The relatively inexperienced leadership team has begun to appreciate its accountabilities for all aspects of the school's performance; rightly, the team has started to question critically many longstanding practices and assumptions which have led to the underachievement of too many pupils.

The systems for the school's self-evaluation are underdeveloped at all levels. Whole-school procedures for the monitoring and evaluation of the quality of

teaching and learning are not secure, although line management monthly reviews are planned for introduction at the start of the autumn term. Middle managers have taken diverse initiatives to improve practice within their own areas of the curriculum, but this action has been within a framework which lacks overall coherence and focus. Subject leaders do not all provide models of good practice in classrooms. Difficulties with the recruitment and retention of teachers remain; a significant proportion of the teaching staff will be new in September.

The governing body has been strengthened by new members, and a core group of governors is beginning to hold the leadership team to account from a more informed perspective. The minutes of full governing body and committee meetings, together with records of visits to the school, indicate the governors' greater readiness to question entrenched practice in order to tackle the school's current difficulties. There is an emerging shared sense of purpose to provide the quality of education the pupils deserve.

The LEA has provided a range of curriculum and advisory support, some of which has begun to have an impact on the pupils and staff. The LEA, governing body and headteacher recognise the importance of collaborating, with urgency, over the coming months to address the school's areas for improvement.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: improve the quality of teaching and learning

This has been evaluated above. Progress is limited.

2: improve the quality of leadership and management

This has been evaluated above. Progress is limited.