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Mrs J Clarke
Headteacher
Earls Colne Primary School
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Dear Mrs Clarke

Implementation of Earls Colne Primary School's Action Plan

Following my visit to your school on 15 and 16 June 2005, I write to confirm the findings and to notify you of the outcomes.

As you know, the inspection was part of a policy involving a broader series of visits by HMI and Additional Inspectors to check on the development and improvement of schools which have been designated by their section 10 inspection as having serious weaknesses. You will recall that 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 and removing the causes of the serious weaknesses.

During the visit I inspected ten lessons or part lessons; attended a registration period and an assembly; scrutinised a wide range of documentation provided by the school; and held discussions with you, your senior management team and subject leaders for English and science, the chair of governors and two LEA representatives on the areas for improvement identified in the section 10 inspection. I also examined a range of pupils' work and spoke informally with other staff and pupils. It was not possible to visit all classes on this visit. I therefore concentrated on seeing the teachers in Key Stage 2 and in the Year 2 classes. Each of these teachers was only seen once. As a result, the judgements made in reference to teaching and learning do not take account of the nursery, reception and Year 1 classes where, at the time of the section 10 inspection, there were no significant issues to be addressed.

On the basis of the evidence gathered during the visit, I made the following observations to you, your two deputies, the chair of governors and two LEA representatives.

Standards achieved by the Year 2 pupils in the most recent national tests are close to last year's national average in writing and mathematics, but are below average in reading. More pupils attained the higher Level 3 in writing, but fewer pupils attained Level 3 in reading and mathematics. Overall, these figures are lower than those for the previous cohort. At the end of Year 6, the teachers' assessments show that the pupils' attainment will be close to national figures in English, mathematics and science. If this is achieved, the results will be an improvement on last year with an increase in the number of pupils reaching Level 5 in all three subjects, but particularly in science.

In lessons, standards achieved in English and science were mainly at the levels expected for age, except in reading in a Year 3 lesson, and in one Year 4 class where standards were much lower than in the parallel class. In all the lessons except one, progress was at least satisfactory, and good progress was made in three lessons. In a Year 3 class, a group of the pupils made unsatisfactory progress.

The quality of teaching was mainly sound with some good teaching evident in Year 2 and in Years 5 and 6. In a couple of lessons deemed to be satisfactory overall in Key Stage 2, strengths and weaknesses were finely balanced. In these lessons, the pace of teaching was not as brisk as it could be and management of the pupils was not always effective in ensuring that all the pupils made good progress.

The teaching of English and science has improved as a result of better planning and a closer adherence to the requirements of the National Curriculum. For the most part, teachers are clear in exposition and have good questioning techniques. Management of the pupils' behaviour is nearly always effective and relationships are good. The organisation of pupils into groups and pairs to discuss their work is more frequently seen and it enhances the learning, although this is not yet a well-established practice in all classes. The quality of plenaries at the end of lessons varied from ineffective to good, for instance when plenaries were used to assess, reinforce and take learning further. The pupils who have special educational needs are suitably supported throughout the school and they make sound progress over time.

Planning for teaching and learning has greatly improved, with a common format and agreed criteria now in place. Assessment procedures are improving and there is an enhanced awareness of the importance of tracking the pupils' progress from reception onwards. Some assessment procedures are now securely established. The teachers are starting to use test results as a means of identifying the pupils' achievements, to set targets for teaching and learning and to inform planning. Procedures for day-to-day assessment are at an early stage of development, although a start has been made in an agreed approach to marking. There are some examples of good practice, where annotation of work provides helpful feedback and guidance to the pupils, and sets small targets for them to improve their work. All the teachers, however, are not yet using marking as a direct means

of assessment.

The pupils' response in lessons was good in all but one lesson. In this case, the teacher's management of the pupils was not sufficiently effective; as a result, a significantly large group of pupils were off task for some of the time and their learning was restricted. For the most part, the pupils were attentive to the teachers, settled quickly to their work, stayed on task for suitable periods of time, were keen to participate in whole class sessions and showed enthusiasm for learning. This was often achieved in spite of problems with noise filtering through from open-plan paired classrooms. Behaviour in classrooms and beyond was good overall. The pupils enjoy coming to school and attendance is good.

Leadership by the headteacher is sound. She has received some training in personnel management, financial management, and working with governors. The intended support and advice from an experienced headteacher acting as mentor has not been as successful as anticipated. Also, having three different School Development Advisors allocated to the school within the period of eighteen months has not been helpful towards increasing the headteacher's leadership and management skills. However, these skills are developing as the headteacher and her team address the areas for improvement within the school action plan. The action plan is sound. It is clearly written and addresses all the concerns identified in the report. It sets out what needs to be done and who will lead each development. Actions are appropriate and success criteria are focused and, in relation to standards and teaching, are quantifiable. Monitoring and evaluation roles are suitably allocated to different persons.

A new leadership team has been established and includes two deputy headteachers and the leaders of the core subjects, information and communication technology and special educational needs. They are enthusiastic and committed and have already made considerable strides towards addressing the school's serious weaknesses. However, their roles and responsibilities have yet to be clearly defined. Effective performance management is at an early stage of development and the staff has a heightened awareness and understanding of the cycle of performance management which will re-start in July 2005.

Communication systems have improved and managers, teachers and their assistants understand what is required of them in order to raise standards. Although there is good practice evident, not all newly agreed policies and systems are consistently and effectively implemented.

The English and science subject leaders have produced and are successfully implementing their own action plans, which are specifically linked to all the areas for improvement in the school action plan. The English leaders in particular, have done much to improve teaching and learning in their subject.

The school recognises that monitoring is an area for further development. A timetable for monitoring provision and practice within the school has just been

completed, which should ensure that teachers are freed from the classroom in order to carry out this work. The headteacher and the core subject co-ordinators have already completed some monitoring. This has included looking at planning, scrutinising workbooks, analysis of test results and observation in some classrooms. Feedback and guidance have been given to the teachers as a result of issues emerging; for example, weaknesses in teaching, marking, planning formats and planning across year groups, writing skills, and investigative work in science. Improvements are evident.

A development plan has been completed for the Governing Body. Governors are actively involved in monitoring the school's progress against the issues in its action plan; they all have curriculum responsibilities and some have met with subject leaders. Initial training, to develop an understanding of the Panda report, was not sufficiently focused and a further training session is planned. The governors have agreed to extend the school day from September. This, combined with possible changes in groupings within the school in the future, means that curriculum and planning will require careful review. Overall, the governors have an enhanced understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are carrying them out satisfactorily. All statutory requirements are now in place.

The quality of the LEA's statement and commentary is satisfactory and the impact of the support given to the subject leaders in particular has been very good, leading to improved management and teaching within English and science. The support has been less effective in relation to addressing the needs of the headteacher, who feels that she has learned much in the process of addressing the school's weaknesses, but still has a number of aspects to develop, not least, monitoring.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: improve leadership, management and governance

There have been considerable improvements in the progress made by the headteacher and governors in their leadership and governance roles and in the development of a senior management team and their effectiveness in supporting and advising the teachers. Monitoring needs to be developed further so that it has more of a direct impact on increasing consistency of practice, improving the quality of teaching and raising standards. Progress is reasonable.

2: raise the achievement of pupils in Year 6 in English and science

Standards in these two subjects are rising as a result of the increased focus on developing a better understanding of levelling and what is required to be taught in these subjects. The most recent teachers' assessments confirm this. Progress is reasonable.

3: improve the quality of teaching to a consistently good level in Years 3 to 6

Although teaching in these year groups were judged satisfactory on this visit, there are still inconsistencies in practice and in some cases, there are significant areas requiring improvement. There is still too little good teaching throughout the Key Stage. Progress is limited.

4: develop rigorous procedures to check on pupils' progress and use the information in teachers' planning to ensure work is more closely matched to pupils' needs

Many assessment procedures are in place or being developed. Some are well established and are having an impact on planning for teaching and learning. However, greater consistency of implementation and more rigour is needed to ensure that all assessment evidence is used towards raising standards. Progress is reasonable overall.

Reasonable progress has been made in implementing the action plan and removing the causes of the school's serious weaknesses.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education for Essex. This letter will also be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Anne Murrell (HMI retired)
Additional Inspector

cc: chair of governors
LEA