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Mrs A Payne  
Headteacher  
Arnold Middle School  
Hexton Road  
Barton le Clay  
Bedford  
MK45 4JZ

Dear Mrs Payne

### **Implementation of Arnold Middle School's Action Plan**

Following my visit to your school on 11 and 12 July with my colleague Mrs Pat Cox, Additional Inspector, we 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 where the section 10 inspection indicated that the school was underachieving. You will recall that the aims of the visit were to assess the progress made in addressing and eliminating underachievement and meeting the targets given in the action plan. We also evaluated standards of achievement and the quality of education, especially in relation to areas of underachievement.

During the visit we inspected 16 lessons or part lessons; attended two registration periods and an assembly; scrutinised a wide range of documentation provided by the school; and held discussions with yourself and nominated staff on the causes and areas of underachievement. We also examined a range of the pupils' work and spoke informally with other staff and pupils.

On the basis of the evidence gathered during the visit, we made the following observations to you, your two senior teacher colleagues, and representatives of the LEA and the governing body.

The action plan addresses each of the major areas of weakness identified in the inspection report. It identifies a range of suitable strategies and assigns responsibilities. Monitoring and evaluation strategies are outlined, and sensibly involve a wide range of personnel, both in the school and elsewhere. Success criteria are identified, but are too general. There is inadequate reference to

attainment targets for different groups of pupils, or to other measurable targets, for example, for the quality of teaching.

In the 2004 tests at the end of Year 6, the percentage of pupils reaching the age-expected Level 4 was above average in English and mathematics, and well above average in science. This represented an improvement of one benchmark level in English and science, and two in mathematics compared to 2003, which was the year reported in the previous inspection. Compared to similar schools by prior attainment, the percentages of pupils achieving the expected level were below average in English and mathematics and in line with the average in science. In 2005 the results were broadly similar to those in 2004. Hence the school has made progress in raising attainment in the core subjects, although underachievement still remains in mathematics and English.

By the end of Year 8 the percentage of pupils who had already attained the age-expected level for the Key Stage 3 tests at the end of Year 9, was above average in English and mathematics, and well above average in science. Compared to similar schools this was well above average in mathematics and English, but low in science. In the lesson seen, standards were generally above the national average. Achievement by the end of Year 8 is generally satisfactory.

There is a considerable amount of attainment data available to the school. It is well used to set targets for individual pupils to involve them in their own learning, to help them to understand their targets, and to assist teachers and parents to identify underachievement and take appropriate action. It is less well used to identify trends in subject areas related to the achievement of different groups of pupils in order to plan for improvement in the performance of those groups. The standards analysis in the draft self-evaluation form (SEF), for example, gives little indication of the strengths and weaknesses behind the overall results. The school has yet to use data effectively as a tool for improvement.

Provision for the pupils' moral and social development is good; a clear behaviour policy has been developed and is applied consistently. The pupils' behaviour was good and often very good around the school and in lessons. The older pupils take on responsibilities as monitors and support younger pupils with problems. The pupils were attentive and obedient in almost all lessons. When the teaching was good, they were totally involved and concentrated well, trying their best and responding eagerly throughout. The pupils' attitudes to learning were mainly satisfactory and in the more successful lessons they were good. They usually worked together well and paid careful attention. In many lessons, however, most of the pupils were passive and unwilling to respond to questions. They worked sensibly rather than enthusiastically. Although most pupils are very mature, there was too little evidence of them developing their independent learning. There was some fuss, inattention and noise in one lesson when the teaching was poor, although the pupils occupied themselves in other ways rather than losing their

self-control. Since the inspection, the rate of exclusions has reduced, as has the number of pupils being excluded.

The assemblies observed met statutory requirements. One was linked well to the curriculum and the other gave the pupils a sound opportunity to consider how to be patient in the achievement of their goals. Attendance is above the national average and the decline in attendance rates evident in 2003 and 2004 has been arrested.

Of the 16 lessons observed, the teaching was very good in one, good in four, satisfactory in seven, but unsatisfactory in three and poor in one. The proportion of good and unsatisfactory teaching may be unrepresentative, as not all teachers were observed. Nevertheless, the balance of strengths and weaknesses demonstrates that there are still concerns about the number of occasions when the pupils do not make enough progress.

When the teaching was good, there was a calm working atmosphere in the classroom and the planning was detailed and based on precise knowledge of the pupils' attainment. The learning objectives were clear and the activities well planned to achieve them. Tasks built on the pupils' knowledge and understanding and were carefully allocated to different groups of pupils. The teaching was lively and enthusiastic, and founded on good subject knowledge. Expectations were high and the pace was brisk. Strategies to control the pupils' behaviour were firm and positive. Questions were used well to challenge and promote thinking.

In most instances, the teachers planned and prepared their lessons carefully and shared their specific lesson objectives with the pupils, although not always in a way that was readily understandable to pupils. The objectives were often referred to at the end of the lesson but rarely in a way that moved the learning on. The weaknesses in teaching, some of which were displayed when it was satisfactory overall, mainly concerned low expectations, lack of pace and insufficient clarity about what the pupils were to learn. One lesson was disorganised and was consequently disrupted because of the teacher's difficulty in managing the pupils. In some lessons, the teachers did not emphasise sufficiently the importance of the quality of the finished work and accepted a lower standard than the pupils were capable of producing. Much of the teaching lacked urgency and did not convey to the pupils the necessity for making rapid gains in their learning. In a number of mathematics lessons, the pupils learned how to carry out processes, for example how to bisect an angle, without understanding the underlying concepts and principles. Plenary sessions were often perfunctory.

Assessment for learning is developing satisfactorily. The data from tests and teachers' assessments provide a sound basis for the teachers to plan their work. However, the school is still at an early stage in using ongoing assessment, during and after lessons, as a key tool in informing lesson planning. Marking is inconsistent. It is secure in English but not in mathematics or science. It is often evaluative in English and makes reference to the objectives of the lesson, giving

advice for pupils as to how they can improve their work. This is, however, rare in other subjects and marking was particularly weak in some books in the foundation subjects. In some cases, the marking is having little impact, with the same errors being repeated.

Lessons are an appropriate length and the timetables make the best use of the time available. However, some time was lost at the beginning of lessons. In two tutor groups, the pupils were up to five minutes late and in one the teacher was even later. The reorganisation of sets has enhanced the learning; the teachers are now able to plan more accurately the work for the range of attainment in their classes and groups.

The leadership and management of the headteacher and the senior leadership team are good. There has been a clear focus on raising the standard of professional practice in order to improve the pupils' achievement. This has revitalised and motivated many of the staff team. Governors, parents and the LEA have been included to positive effect. The morale of the staff has improved and as a result many departments are working hard to remove weaknesses. The headteacher has restructured the staff team and is gradually strengthening it, although weaknesses remain. Improvement planning is generally good, and well linked at all levels, but planning for monitoring and evaluation, although broad in scope, lacks credible success criteria to give a sharp enough focus. Management systems, incorporating professional development and monitoring of professional standards are good, but there is an over-generous interpretation of what constitutes satisfactory teaching, and there are too many weaknesses in the teaching.

The quality of support from the LEA is good. It provides well for the support of the headteacher. Consultancy support for individual departments, and for subject leaders has been good in most cases. County-wide structures, such as the learning communities and the analysis of attainment results, support the school.

### **Evaluation of Progress:**

The school is making reasonable progress towards raising pupils' attainment and eliminating underachievement.

In relation to the action plan and the impact of the actions taken, reasonable progress has been made in addressing the key tasks which relate to the school's underachievement.

The school should continue to:

- focus on the quality of teaching and learning by setting clear targets, and taking appropriate action to achieve them;

- develop the use of data to identify clearly those groups of pupils who are underperforming, and continue to develop teachers' capability in using data for lesson planning;
- develop the pupils' capacity for independent learning.

This visit has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the school's performance will be monitored.

I am copying this letter to the chair of governors and the Strategic Director of Education for Bedfordshire. This letter will also be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

**John English**  
**Additional Inspector**

cc: chair of governors  
LEA