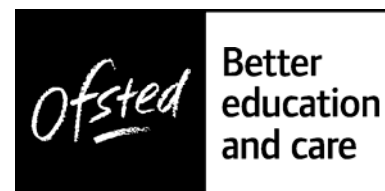


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Mr J Baker
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mr Baker

Implementation of Lexden Springs Special School's Action Plan

Following the visit of Carmen Rodney HMI and Maureen York HMI to your school on 27 and 28 June 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures. The focus of the inspection was to assess: 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 has made reasonable progress since the last monitoring inspection and reasonable progress overall since being subject to special measures.

The school should not appoint newly qualified teachers until further notice.

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 for Essex. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Reid
Head of Institutional Inspections and Frameworks Division

IMPLEMENTATION OF LEXDEN SPRINGS SPECIAL SCHOOL'S ACTION PLAN

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

During the visit 16 lessons or parts of lessons, three registration sessions and one assembly were inspected. Meetings were held with the acting headteacher, the chair of governors and the link adviser. 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 and vice-chair of the governing body and a representative from the LEA.

The amendments to the action plan have been addressed as required. The time scale should however be altered to reflect the LEA's target date of 2006.

The school has ensured that the curriculum is tailored to the pupils' needs enabling them to make small but meaningful gains in most lessons. The school's data indicates that all of the pupils have either achieved a grade on the P-level assessment criteria or they are working towards Level 1 of the National Curriculum level descriptions. In Years 12 to 14, the students follow the ASDAN accredited course. The school's assessment data predicts that the early entry of four students will be successful.

The quality of teaching and learning was at least satisfactory in 14 of the 16 lessons. It was good or better in ten lessons and very good in two. Unsatisfactory teaching and learning were observed in two lessons and one lesson was barely satisfactory.

In the best lessons, the teachers' planning was clearly focused on learning outcomes and there were high expectations for each pupil. The teachers created a purposeful learning environment which involved effective team work with the learning support assistants. These assistants had a clear understanding of their roles and worked very well alongside the pupils, skilfully echoing instructions, signing and demonstrating as required. The teachers carefully used a range of resources to involve all of the pupils. Assessment for learning was integrated into the planning and the momentum of lessons was maintained through questioning, challenging the most able and the effective use of short activities. The pupils received very good individual support and praise was used regularly to encourage their responses and develop their communication skills. In these lessons and the satisfactory lessons, the teachers made very effective use of a range of strategies for organising pupils and for managing their behaviour.

The less successful lessons had a number of common features. Planning was weak and there was insufficient focus on learning; the learning objectives described the activities rather than giving sufficient thought to what the pupils would learn.

These lessons were not well structured to extend the pupils' skills. In addition, planning did not always anticipate potential behavioural difficulties. The teachers dominated the lessons and rarely were the pupils given sufficient opportunities to participate. Limited resources and planned activities were insufficiently matched to the pupils' individual needs. The teachers did not assess what the pupils had gained and their expectations were too low. Generally there were too few opportunities for the pupils to develop their communication skills and for the more able pupils to become more independent in their learning.

The quality of learning was closely related to the teaching. As at the last monitoring visit, the pupils achieved well when planning and learning resources reflected their individual needs. Progress was good and sometimes better when the pupils were given challenging tasks with time and support to respond. They made less progress when the work was undemanding and they were not actively engaged. Progress was particularly limited when the learning environment was tense as a result of the pupils' challenging behaviour and the slow response of the teachers to manage the disruptions. On these occasions the pupils soon lost focus and became unsettled as their tantrums affected the pace of teaching and learning.

Attitudes and behaviour were satisfactory or better in 14 out of 16 lessons. In lessons, the pupils responded very well to opportunities to participate in group or whole-class work. Most of the pupils enjoyed the set activities taking part in practical work which involved them taking responsibility for small tasks; for example, playing a musical instrument. Where behaviour was unsatisfactory, this was linked to the pupils being unsettled and distressed and finding it difficult to respond immediately to the support and interventions.

Attendance for 2004-05 is in line with the national median for special schools. The school met its target of 91.1 per cent. Since the start of the school year, attendance has dropped slightly due to ill health among a number of the pupils. There has been no exclusion for the last 12 months.

The management of the curriculum has been strengthened by a senior manager being made responsible for this area of work. Subject co-ordinators are developing their expertise and management responsibilities; however, while there is greater coherence in curriculum planning, there is still inconsistency in ensuring that planning meets the pupils' diverse needs. The school is rightly introducing accredited courses in Key Stage 4 for the most able pupils. The post-16 curriculum is being widened in September to include the ASDAN vocational course which is appropriate for the students. The school is rightly working to establish important curriculum links with local schools to improve the pupils' physical education options and enrich their vocational studies. The school has effective routines for the start and end of the school day and the pupils benefit from good support during tutorial sessions.

The use of assessment to inform teaching and learning is inconsistent. While the school sets appropriate targets for individual pupils, there is insufficient use of the

assessment data to modify the learning objectives and the related activities for individual pupils. The termly review of individual education plans provides an opportunity to adjust the pupils' targets; however, the learning targets are insufficiently precise to enable the pupils' progress to be closely monitored and evaluated.

The school has worked hard to maintain useful communication with parents. It is steadily seeking the views of parents and finding ways of involving them. A recent feedback of parental views on the use of individual education plans was very encouraging. However, too few attend the review day. There has been some dissent about the school's provision from a tiny minority but this is not representative of most parents.

The acting headteacher has led the school well throughout his two terms of tenure. His leadership and management have helped create a new impetus which has had a positive impact on the pace of development. He has been well supported by the deputy headteacher and staff. The acting headteacher has started to communicate the priorities for the future development of the school. He has identified clear line management responsibilities for the senior managers and they are beginning to meet them effectively. While considerable progress has been made in overcoming the barriers which prevented the school from making adequate progress before the monitoring inspections, further development is needed; for example, not enough action has been taken to address the needs of the pupils with challenging behaviour and there has been slow progress in ensuring that appropriate behaviour plans are in place for all of the pupils.

Governance is satisfactory. The governing body has gained much support and advice from the LEA. Records of minutes revealed that this has had a positive impact; meetings are focused and efficiently run. The governors have established a clear approach to working with staff; they are beginning to monitor the delivery of the action plan and are increasing their strategic management; for example, by prioritising the needs of the school and the management of the budget. Since the last monitoring visit, a substantive headteacher has been appointed for the start of the new academic year in September 2005. Appropriate transitional arrangements are being developed to support the new headteacher. Governors have begun discussions with the LEA on the poor quality of some aspects of the accommodation. The governors have valued the support, guidance and training given by the LEA which is helping them to shape the school's direction.

The LEA has continued to provide the school with a range of good support. The LEA's interventionist role has been well focused on equipping the senior and middle managers with the skills to improve the school's provision. The LEA is aware that it has successfully helped the senior team to identify the school's strengths and weaknesses. However, there has been insufficient specialist support from the LEA to assist staff with developing appropriate strategies to tackle challenging behaviour. Discussions on increasing the amount of time available for the school

nurse are still ongoing. The LEA is rightly considering a programme of mentoring and support for the new headteacher.

Action taken to address the areas for improvement

1: strengthen the leadership and management provided by the headteacher and the whole leadership group in the school

The structures for monitoring the school's work are more secure as the senior team and middle managers have had appropriate training and have begun to monitor the quality of provision. There is, however, a lack of clarity in the school's strategic management. Progress is reasonable.

2: eliminate unsatisfactory and poor teaching by establishing a strong culture of self-evaluation of the work of the school

Since the last monitoring visit, the school has continued to develop its approach to monitoring teaching and learning. Progress is reasonable.

3: give effective leadership to planning and achieving a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum

The curriculum, which is appropriate, is to be strengthened by the introduction of new courses in September. Progress is reasonable.

4: give effective leadership to creating and using assessment procedures to raise standards

The school has established a sound assessment system; however, the procedures used to monitor and evaluate the pupils' progress and the use of assessment information to improve learning are less well developed. Progress is reasonable.