

31 March 2006

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

Dear Mrs Allen

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF READING GIRLS' SCHOOL

Introduction

Following my visit to your school on 27 and 28 March 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in February 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

The inspector visited a number of lessons, reviewed documents, and met with the headteacher, staff, groups of pupils and a representative from the local authority.

Achievement and standards

In the 2005 tests at Key Stage 3, the overall value-added measures between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 indicated levels of progress well above the national average. Progress in lessons continues to be broadly satisfactory: it is good in many higher and lower attaining sets.

At GCSE in 2005, progress made by pupils between the end of Year 9 and end of Year 11 was inadequate when set alongside similar schools. The variability of achievement in English, mathematics and science was rightly identified by the school as a priority to be tackled. Projected results at GCSE

for 2006 suggest a narrowing of the gap between the higher and lower performing core subjects. Progress in lessons is satisfactory overall.

Personal development and well-being

The previous monitoring visit identified a lack of consistency and decisive action from staff in challenging the careless behaviour of a significant minority of the girls. Some progress has been made, both in lessons and around the campus, but recent improvements in teaching and learning will only be sustained if all staff address this issue with rigour and urgency.

Improvements to the building have been made and are warmly welcomed by the girls; however, much remains to be done to achieve an environment which promotes consistently a positive climate for learning. The student body is proud of its school, but some girls do not take sufficient pride in how they conduct themselves, treat their surroundings, maintain their planners and present their work.

The girls have been particularly pleased with the way in which their opinions have been responded to in relation to changes in the school uniform, and they expressed eloquently how discussions at school council have played a part in the general improvements which are underway. Recent discussions around rewards and sanctions have proved constructive.

Attendance this term averages just above 92% in the main school, although on the first day of the monitoring visit it was just below 90%. Attendance in the sixth form is unsatisfactory. Punctuality to school in the mornings and to lessons through the day has improved, although it requires constant staff vigilance because a number of the girls have not yet taken responsibility for themselves in this key aspect of their approach to school life.

Quality of provision

The senior staff, supported by the local authority and external consultants, has a very clear and honest picture of the quality of teaching and learning. Teaching has steadily improved and is now satisfactory overall, with good and outstanding elements. All staff should take credit for this. A well planned and carefully executed programme of sharing best practice, mentoring and coaching, peer observation and, above all, hard work and an openness to fresh ideas have delivered for the pupils a better day-to-day experience in classrooms. The pace of learning in some lessons, particularly in middle ability sets, can be undemanding, and the school has rightly identified that this is a focus for future lesson observations. The pupils are adept at identifying the features of good lessons: 'when we put our ideas together in

groups'; 'when there is fun as well as learning'; 'when we know our levels and we know where we are going'; 'when the teacher is strict and clear about deadlines'; 'interactive whiteboards help the teacher help us'.

The flow of some lessons is interrupted by the unthinking behaviour of a minority of girls. One pupil spoke of 'lessons being hectic when girls knew they could try it on with the teacher'. Senior staff know that consistency of effective practice is not yet secure in the school, and recruitment of specialist teachers in some subjects remains problematic. Morning tutor sessions are being used more effectively.

Assessment, previously singled out as being an obstacle to improvements in teaching and learning, has improved significantly. Teachers are using prior assessment data constructively to plan lessons, and the girls value knowing which level they are working at. Progress report cards, annual reports and target days meet the needs of the pupils, and the tracking of pupils' progress in Year 11 has been meticulous, with potential under-achievement identified and promptly addressed. Marking remains mixed in quality and regularity but, at its best, serves to motivate the pupils to achieve to their highest potential. The setting of homework, and pupils' accurate recording of what has been set, is unduly variable.

The girls enjoy the curriculum on offer, and the school organises a wide range of visitors to promote skills and knowledge beyond academic subjects. During the monitoring visit Year 10 were busily involved in an enterprise day focusing on employability skills, and course tutors commended the girls' achievements. The wide variety of sports clubs is favourably commented on by pupils; they want now to see more extracurricular opportunities in other subject areas. Pupils also identify certain problems with the distribution of subjects over the 10-day timetable, something which the school is keen to resolve for September 2006.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2005:

- improve the quality of teaching and learning – good progress.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management, at all levels, have engaged positively with the agenda for urgent school improvement, outlined in the last monitoring letter. The leadership team have looked afresh at their own responsibilities and adroitly balanced challenge and support for staff. Effective line management is emerging, and is a key platform for the further sharing of proven whole-school practice. Training has been productive, enhanced by various

contributions from a partner secondary school. Middle managers have begun to thrive on accountability, and all staff have enjoyed seeing the quality of teaching improve. Where standards in performance have not been good enough, they have been challenged appropriately.

The school's action plan following the inspection of February 2005 has served well to focus actions at all levels within the school. Self-evaluation is increasingly rigorous, and its impact positive. There is a unity of purpose and palpable desire from staff to provide a good standard of education for the girls. Following a period of slow progress, the staff and governors are demonstrating strong capacity to sustain the gains of the past two terms.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2005:

- improve the quality of leadership and management – good progress.

External support

The school has benefited from a range of support given to teachers, the leadership team and to the girls. This support has included consultants on aspects of teaching and learning, and leadership and management. Academic mentoring provided by a number of people external to the school has had a positive effect on the achievement and motivation of Year 11 students. Governance continues to strengthen and hold the leadership team to account for different aspects of the school's provision; governors are aware of the importance of monitoring assiduously the deficit budget.

Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures – good progress.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good progress.

Priorities for further improvement

- continue to raise staff's expectations of pupils' attitudes and behaviour
- sustain the good improvements in the quality of teaching
- sharpen the focus of all staff on pupils' progress in lessons, particularly in middle ability sets.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Education & Community Services for Reading.

Yours sincerely

Roy Blatchford
H M Inspector