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Mrs S West  
Headteacher  
Millbrook Community Primary School,  
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Dear Mrs West

Ofsted survey inspection programme – schools formerly in special measures now judged to be good or better

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Nada Trikić HMI on 26 September to look at work done to improve the school's overall effectiveness since it was placed in special measures in September 2002

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit focused on the successful actions taken by the school to build capacity and significantly improve provision, particularly in relation to: the impact of external support; the involvement of pupils and parents in school improvement; issues around staffing and leadership and management.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the outcomes of the visit included interviews with the headteacher, senior staff, a group of pupils, the local authority link advisor, and the chair of governors. Other relevant documentation was scrutinised.

A significant factor in the school's improvement was the intensive and well focused professional development of teaching and support staff. One of the key areas for improvement when the school went into special measures was pupil achievement. This was linked to variability in the quality of teaching and the curriculum, and assessment of pupils' progress.

The school and local authority identified that this was the priority area for improvement, which underpinned and enabled all other developments. They invested heavily in a coherent and wide ranging programme of staff training and development. This was initially very intensive, with the local authority providing considerable training resources across a range of areas, through, for example, the involvement of the literacy and numeracy co-ordinators. The timing of this was opportune, as the school became in effect a pilot for the local authority's support for national strategies. As a result, new initiatives were embedded in the school both very quickly and very comprehensively. This whole school approach was effectively supplemented by the identification of individual training needs in specific subject or management areas. Local authority advisers provided training in these areas and staff were enabled to visit other schools to learn from existing good practice.

Similarly, the school became a pilot for the development of assessment for learning. As a whole school, staff developed greater expertise in assessment, marking, target setting, and crucially, the analysis of this process to improve pupil progress across the school. There was a considerable focus on ensuring that all staff used the information effectively to ensure that expectations of pupils' progress across national curriculum levels were sufficiently high.

The school undertook similar work on the development of the curriculum, which is now very varied with a wide range of enrichment activities. This is now a distinctive element of the school, and is continuing to develop.

Although at the time the school was placed in special measures pupils overall were underachieving, this was particularly the case for pupils at both ends of the ability range. The school judges its development of inclusion to be fundamental to its improvement. It undertook considerable development work to ensure effective partnership between teaching and support staff, and prompt focus on pupils' individual needs. This was enabled and further developed by the ongoing improvements in assessment and target setting across the school. Provision for gifted and talented pupils was improved through these means, the establishment of an appropriate register, and through access to the increasing range of additional activities.

As a result of these developments, there is now a whole school focus on meeting every child's needs and striving for continual improvement in both teaching and learning. In the inspection which removed the school from special measures, the quality of teaching was good. In the latest inspection, in June 2006, the quality of teaching was judged to be outstanding. Pupil achievement over the last three years has been consistently well above average.

The head teacher had been in post for one year before the designation of special measures. Her leadership has been positive throughout, with a very strong emphasis on enabling all staff to develop skills and take shared responsibility for school improvement. The successful and continuing development of this is a very notable characteristic of the school. All those

interviewed agreed that the single biggest factor in improvement was ensuring that the capacity to improve was built sustainably and across the whole school. This has been particularly successful given that the school experienced some significant staff mobility after it came out of special measures, and that this did not reduce the drive and effectiveness of school improvement as could be expected. Good practice is now embedded throughout the school. There are stringent recruitment procedures aimed at appointing the person who best fits the needs of the staff team and the class, and excellent induction and monitoring arrangements. Staff morale is high, and they comment that they feel confident to experiment, develop and share ideas in a mutually supporting and challenging environment.

The head teacher describes herself as 'leading from the back', which illustrates well the importance of the school's very positive and collaborative ethos, but does not do justice to her determined vision for the school and her ability to maintain a strong focus on the overall school improvement strategy. This latter quality ensured that the staff's continually improving skills, and great commitment to the school, were directed effectively towards the key areas for improvement.

The local authority provided extremely strong and well focused support, both with regard to the provision of training and in supporting the senior team and governing body to maintain the strategic drive towards improvement. This support was proportionately reduced but continued, particularly to the governing body, until the inspection two years after the school came out of special measures. All stakeholders feel that this has played a significant part in ensuring that momentum was maintained and preventing any dip in performance in the period immediately after the school had been removed from special measures.

When the school went in to special measures, it was struggling to gain parental involvement. This has improved, partly because of specific initiatives, for example special assemblies and records of attendance at parents' meetings. However, a significant factor has also been the improvements in the curriculum, which have gradually encouraged parents to be more involved either in accompanying pupils on visits or repeating or supplementing these visits as families out of school time. A number of parents now act as volunteer helpers and some are working towards teaching assistant qualifications.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop in the school.

A copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Andrea Lyons  
Her Majesty's Inspector