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Mrs A Peacock
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Peacock

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 and pupils, during my visit on 11 October to look at work done to improve the school's overall effectiveness since it was placed in special measures in May 2001.

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, teachers and support staff, a group of Year 6 pupils, a group of parents, representatives of the local authority and the chair of the governing body. Other relevant documentation was scrutinised.

The school community has undergone some profound changes since being made subject to special measures in 2001. Staff, pupils, parents and the chair of governors were able to reflect clearly on some of the school's characteristics at that time and compare them to the way the school is now. All were clear that the headteacher's leadership has been and remains pivotal in improving the school. Pupils, for example, when reflecting on their time in school, divided it into 'before Mrs Peacock' and 'after Mrs Peacock arrived'. Equally, staff were definite in their views that the headteacher's leadership, particularly her clear sense of direction, encouragement and presence, have had a highly positive effect on the school and on outcomes for the pupils. Three particular themes emerged during the course of the day which best

describe some of the fundamental changes which are most important to members of the school community.

Firstly, at the time the school went into special measures, there was a sense of isolation. The local authority (LA) describe how the school itself was isolated from the LA and its support services, having previously been grant maintained. While many staff worked hard, there was little discussion with each other about the work they were doing and no clear sense of direction. During the visit pupils talked, without prompting, about how they 'always stayed' in their own class and seldom spent any time with younger or older children. Individual governors also felt segregated from the main governing body. The way in which the school operates now is in sharp contrast to this situation. There is an exceptionally clear sense of shared purpose, true collaboration and a continual emphasis on teamwork. The team genuinely includes all members of the school community – pupils, teachers, all support staff, and governors. Parents also feel well included. Strong systems and structures have been created to enable the sense of team to become a reality, for example staff thoroughly enjoy working in faculty teams to plan foundation subject teaching and assessment. The circle groups enable pupils to work with others of all ages, and with other staff members. This sense of teamwork extends to a team approach between staff and pupils with the aim of enabling pupils to be highly successful learners.

Second, communication was a notable theme in all discussions during the day. Previously, staff felt that there was a lack of communication about many aspects of their work. Systems and structures did little to effectively facilitate constructive discussion about learning, or other aspects of the schools work. There were few chances to contribute ideas and pupils had very little opportunity to express their thoughts about the school and how it could improve. The community is now one in which all members' views are listened to. While the direction of the school is clearly set by and led by the headteacher, the routes taken are continually altered because the headteacher and leadership team listen to staff and respond to their thoughts and ideas about how to improve practice. Importantly, pupils are given an excellent opportunity to contribute their views and express their thoughts in a weekly circle group session. Where the school does not make the changes requested by pupils the reasons are clearly explained to them. The school's inclusive values are communicated clearly in actions as well as words.

Third, members of the school community described how, in the past, their work and learning felt tightly directed and controlled. This has been transformed into an emphasis on self control and self motivation, discipline and direction. Like the other aspects noted above, this extends to all members of the school community. The 'learning without limits' approach is well understood by pupils and has had a significant effect on creating well motivated and self-directed learners. Pupils believe that this approach 'has made a massive difference'. Similarly, a range of actions taken by the headteacher and other key staff have led to staff being motivated to continually improve their own practice and keen to drive improvement through a collaborative approach.

The question of how and why the school underwent such a rapid period of fundamental improvement was a focus for the day's discussion. Among others, the following factors emerged:

- The head and chair of governors believe strongly in continuous improvement. There is no complacency, despite the school having been judged to be 'outstanding' in their 2006 section 5 inspection: 'we're constantly on a journey, we're not there yet'; 'we never think we've got there'. This view is consistently echoed by staff, and pupils have the same attitude to their own work.
- There is a striking emphasis on 'being happy' which the headteacher sees as a key outcome for pupils and for staff – this was mentioned in each discussion throughout the day. Rigour, nevertheless remains central to the school's evaluation of its work, from assessment to school dinners. An element of evaluation activity is whether actions help to increase the participants' happiness in school. As a result the school community is a happy one as well as a high achieving one.
- The school is led from the top – the headteacher is clearly in charge - but its work is driven from all directions. Innovation and the force for change comes from teachers, support staff, children and governors, and this is both encouraged and expected by the headteacher.
- A clear value system, highly inclusive of all staff and all pupils, is well articulated and is a benchmark against which all actions are measured.
- The 'learning without limits' philosophy has been put into practice and pupils and staff believe that it has transformed their learning and heightened their enjoyment. This is well understood by the headteacher who was one of the original researchers of the approach.
- There is an exceptionally strong and successful emphasis on ensuring that the school is a community in which everyone is learning. Many staff are currently engaged in accredited learning.

Thank you again for sharing your thoughts on the many ways in which the school has improved. I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop 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

Sue Morris-King
Her Majesty's Inspector