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Mrs A Hudson
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Dear Mrs Hudson

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 on 15 October to look at work done to improve the school's overall effectiveness since it was placed in special measures in March 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, two long serving members of staff, a group of pupils, the local authority link advisor, a representative from the governing body and two parents. Relevant documentation was scrutinised.

The school experienced changes in staffing at both senior team and class teacher level after it was placed in special measures. This provided significant opportunities for school improvement, but also presented a threat, as the vacancies occurred in a sequence which had the potential to destabilise the improvement process on several occasions. The improvement process remained on track because a core group of able and committed staff provided continuity, and because the local authority ensured that senior team vacancies were filled with high quality seconded staff well matched to the

needs of the school. Furthermore, the current headteacher was initially appointed on secondment as deputy head teacher and then headteacher for a term. Her previous knowledge of the school was an important factor in maintaining the pace of change.

After an initial period of turbulence, the staff team stabilised. From the very beginning of the process the school and the local authority were united in focusing on improving the quality of teaching and the curriculum. To enable and support this, there was also a need to develop the skills of key middle management staff such as curriculum co-ordinators. Staff had previously been isolated and unused to sharing and evaluating their practice, so there was a related need to develop a positive team ethos in which new developments could be introduced. The inter-relationship of these needs meant that the acting senior teams had to move forward across a broad front of key action points. The current head teacher was particularly skilled at managing the improvement process so that staff could take responsibility for their own and school development, through a series of short term tasks. With a clear and effective system of review, this meant that all staff could see practical gains on a regular basis, ensure that these were owned by all staff, and embed them in whole school practice. This process was clearly linked to a series of whole school development projects, for example in specific subject areas or in assessment.

The school committed heavily to a programme of staff training and development. Many of the initiatives were planned to ensure that the investment was repaid with improvements in several areas. For example, a staff development visit to the National Gallery resulted in improved subject knowledge and skill in teaching Art throughout the school, greater confidence in evaluating each others' practice, improved morale and teamwork, and an enhanced and more creative school environment. Again there is a pattern in which whole school developments, for example in developing thinking skills or the creative curriculum, are matched with more focused work on specific aspects of core subjects. All stakeholders agreed that, once the new senior leadership team was established, this significant investment in developing staff skills was the most important factor in the school's rapid and continuing improvement. At the time the school was placed in special measures, the quality of teaching was unsatisfactory. It is now outstanding.

The role of curriculum co-ordinators was well developed through their positive participation in this process, and through specific courses such as 'Leading from the Middle'. They are now highly effective and well regarded leaders and managers, who have made a significant contribution to the school's improvement. When the school was placed in special measures, the curriculum was judged to be inadequate as it was limited in range, lacked breadth in foundation subjects, and did not ensure that core subjects received sufficient time. In the last inspection the curriculum was judged to be outstanding, and its richness and diversity is clearly a significant factor in the staff and pupils' enjoyment of learning. This is a direct result of the head teacher's vision, and staff's continuing commitment and enthusiasm for

extending their own and pupils' experience through cross curricular topics, independent learning and links with other cultures.

A number of key issues for improvement were resolved relatively quickly after the school went into special measures, for example, improved communication with parents. This was partly because the new senior team immediately took a series of simple and effective management decisions, such as introducing newsletters and pupil diaries. It was also because the culture of the school perceptibly changed, based on existing staff's commitment, parental involvement, and the new leadership's vision, to become consciously open, welcoming and consultative. Both pupils and parents stress that it is a school where everyone's views are invited and respected. They are rightly proud of its evident care for others, and sense of community both within and outside the school.

The local authority provided strong support for the school, through support with recruitment and secondments, an extensive programme of training, and direct support with monitoring developments in school and supporting the governing body in developing its role. This support was rightly and proportionately reduced after the school came out of special measures but continued until after the last inspection in 2005. This quality and continuity of support, and that of HMI monitoring visits, is agreed by the head teacher and staff to be a significant factor in the school's continuing improvement.

The head teacher's leadership has been critical to the success of the school. She emphasises the importance of a clear 'philosophy of education' and has high expectations of all staff and pupils. She is able to combine a clear strategic view, supported by the necessary formal planning, with the ability to use resources, opportunities and new ideas creatively as they occur. She knows the staff and pupils very well and is adept at identifying and nurturing potential through well matched combinations of support and challenge. The school is now perceived by the community as a happy place, full of energy and celebration of success, and attracts many applicants for teaching posts as a result of its commitment to continuing staff development. It is a genuine learning community.

The Governing Body was not providing the school with sufficient challenge and support at the time the school went into special measures. It was strengthened with Local Authority representation and effective support and guidance from the Link Adviser, and Governors participated in well focused training sessions on a range of key issues. In the last inspection it was judged to be very effective.

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