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Mr Matthew Stokes
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Stokes

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 Monday 15 October to look at work done to improve the school's overall effectiveness since it was placed in special measures in January 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, senior staff, teachers, non-teaching staff, groups of pupils, parents, members of the local community, a representative of the local authority and representatives of the governing body including the vice chair of governors. Other relevant documentation was scrutinised.

When the school was placed in special measures there was initially a period of shock and denial. The judgement came as a surprise to governors, parents and some of the staff because the Foundation Stage and personal development, including behaviour, were all judged as good. There was a culture of blaming others for low achievement combined with low expectations for the pupils themselves. Some staff departed. The governing

body came to realise how serious the situation was. During the summer term the headteacher departed.

An experienced local headteacher was brought in, initially in an acting capacity from September 2001. When the school was unable to make a substantive appointment, the acting headteacher became permanent in 2002. His first priority was to restructure the senior management team. This involved in some instances changing roles to work to individuals' strengths. He recognised in his own self evaluation the importance of demonstrating "high levels of emotional literacy." The headteacher's leadership has been described by staff and governors as one of "approachability, accessibility and communication." It was necessary to instil a culture change within the staff to move away from challenging the special measures judgement. The headteacher had high expectations of all staff. There were some personnel changes, mostly in Key Stage 2 which were strategic, based on teacher performance. The school was able to retain nearly all its high quality staff.

The headteacher recognised the need for changes which were not negotiable. There were clearly defined responsibilities for the senior leadership team and changes in subject coordination to move staff into the right place and foster a team working together. For the first time subject coordinators had the opportunity to plan collaboratively rather than in isolation. Staff became empowered by this reorganisation. The new headteacher brought changes in better communication and greater use of information and communication technology (ICT). Office accommodation and classrooms were refurbished.

The culture change was helped by HMI monitoring visits. By the second visit staff had acknowledged that changes were necessary to improvement provision and outcomes for pupils. Staff recognised the need to pull together and look to themselves rather than blaming the local authority or external agencies.

The new headteacher and chair of the governing body worked more closely together. Governors were more informed over academic performance through detailed subject reports. Governors were also assigned to subjects. More parent governors were appointed but otherwise the governing body was not strengthened further by the local authority. The chair and vice chair remained in post throughout the period.

At this stage there was little involvement from the local authority and the school took ownership of the changes. The local authority did provide additional capacity in the leadership through the secondment of an additional deputy headteacher which provided the kick start to further progress as the school needed to ensure its senior managers had skills in observing and monitoring teaching and that overall systems in place to evaluate teaching were rigorous and consistent. The external consultant had a significant impact working with the senior management team on self evaluation and was instrumental in developing handwriting policy.

Higher expectations of teachers meant a recognition that pupils who start school well below average needed to accelerate their learning. Lessons required pace and urgency. There was a focus from the senior management team and subject leaders on raising standards. A rigorous system of teaching observation was established. Monitoring of teaching was closer through direct observation and work sampling. A programme of training was structured and planned to meet individual needs. The outcome was a greater accountability of teachers.

Good lessons were characterised by interactive teaching, careful planning and better use of assessment for learning. The emphasis was on learning. Although standards have improved in reading, mathematics and science there has been a drop in standards in writing at the end of Key Stage 2. There had been good teaching identified in the school at the time it was placed in special measures but characteristically teachers were working on their own and good practice was not shared. Teaching assistants who had previously not been included were now involved in planning. As one said, "Before we were told. Now I know what I need to do." This has developed an ethos of teamwork and corporate understanding.

Teachers now have the confidence to be more flexible in their teaching. Targets are shared with pupils who are more involved in their learning. Marking is prompt and challenging. Pupils know where to go next in order to improve. Provision for higher attainers has improved through the allocation of a dedicated member of staff. There is more setting and group work for pupils. A whole school approach to EAL features in lesson planning.

Although aspects including the Foundation Stage and personal development were judged as good when the school was placed in special measures, the school approach was to seek improvements in all areas and not just those identified as weak. A pupil forum gave pupils a greater say in decision making. Pupils chair and take the lead on the pupil forum. Their contribution has led to improved playground facilities, an anti bullying week, PE equipment and water fountains. The school has developed assessment for learning to involve pupils more in self and peer assessment. There has been an increase in the amount of regular homework set for pupils. The headteacher has a higher profile with pupils in the playground.

Parents have been engaged more in the life of the school. Traditionally they came no further than the gate to drop off their children. However, 14 parents of Year 1 pupils have been involved in developing their English which has had an impact on their confidence to support their children's learning. The good practice identified in the Foundation Stage in terms of involving parents is spreading to other areas of the school. The local community remained positive and supportive throughout the school's time in special measures but there was a need to raise the expectations of parents by providing more information about achievement and involving them more in activities such as homework clubs and trips.

It was hard for the school to come out of special measures. The HMI monitoring period was recognised as tough for the school. After initial improvements the school reached a plateau where further improvement was difficult to achieve. The school could only do so much on its own but needed an injection from the local authority to secure its confidence in making judgements on lessons observations. This input found that the school had till now been over generous in its judgement of teaching. The impact of the local authority in shared observations led to an agreed view of provision between the school's leadership team and HMI. The school became sharper in using and interpreting data and linking data to the outcomes of monitoring teaching and learning. The seconded deputy headteacher had an impact in this. Outcomes included pupils who were more engaged in active learning and improved provision for gifted and talented pupils.

Eight monitoring visits by HMI were required before Spinney Hill was taken out of special measures in June 2004. The school has acknowledged that the first monitoring visits "woke staff up." Once out of special measures the school was able to keep up the additional capacity by budgeting for continued support. The school carried on with the process of self evaluation. The leadership team was reviewed following the departure of one of the two deputy heads who had remained with the school through coming out of special measures. There are now two assistant headteachers and one deputy head.

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

Mark Sims
Her Majesty's Inspector