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Dear Dr Clark

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 04 December to look at work done to improve Nightingale School's overall effectiveness since it was placed in special measures in February 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 principal, head of school, teachers and support staff, several Year 10 and 11 students, a representative of the local authority (LA) and the chair of the governing body. Other relevant documentation was scrutinised. During the day, the school was calm and orderly and pupils were well engaged in their learning. Relationships between pupils and staff are excellent. Pupils were impressive in the mature way they conducted themselves in discussions with visitors and interacted with staff around the school.

The question of how and why the school underwent such a rapid period of fundamental improvement was a focus for the day's discussion. A number of factors emerged. The leadership team which took over the school after it went into special measures held a set of clear and well articulated values,

which they communicated well to all staff and modelled on a daily basis. These included the importance of listening as well as talking, the promotion of mutual respect between staff and pupils, the promotion of achievement, and the creation of a gentle environment in place of the aggression which was, in the early stages, a daily part of life at the school. The leadership team, and later the staff team, displayed exceptional tenacity and patience in the face of the extreme behaviour displayed by many pupils. That physical restraint is hardly ever used now, in contrast to the numerous daily occurrences at the time the school went into special measures, is an indicator of the effectiveness of the deliberate change to the school's ethos. Pupils talked of how the respectful way in which they are treated by staff makes them want to show respect in return. One pupil reflected: 'they talk to us like we're people'. Another commented that every day at school he feels welcomed and 'at home', which allows him to be relaxed and therefore to concentrate on his learning. Those who could recall the school when it was in special measures stressed how the environment and expectations had changed to become a 'proper school'.

Based on the leadership team's values of a series of non-negotiable expectations was developed which applied equally to staff and to pupils. The leadership team refer to themselves as being 'ruthless' in enforcing these expectations in order to change the school's deeply engrained culture of underachievement and disorder. Combined with the implementation of a new staffing structure which was not universally popular this unequivocal approach led to a number of staff leaving the school. When recruiting new staff the senior leaders paid careful attention to their values and their ability to build relationships with pupils. This continues to be a priority when making any new staff appointments. As a result, the staff team is cohesive and shares a common view of the school's purpose and aims and the way in which pupils should be treated. Staff feel empowered to lead their areas of responsibility and are supported in doing so. A strong emphasis on training for teachers, mentors and support staff, much of which is accredited, has developed staff's skills and their capacity to be effective team members.

As part of the improvement process the school made a significant effort to build positive relationships with the pupils' families and carers. This was very challenging at first, as parents were alienated from the school and many had not wanted their children to be enrolled. Over time these relationships have evolved and are now an important part of the school's success.

Once the school was reasonably stable a greater emphasis was placed on the importance of developing good quality teaching and learning. The focus was initially on moving away from copying and rote activities to make learning more active. The curriculum has undergone continual development over the past five years, which has been a key factor in maintaining the momentum of improvement. Alongside their academic studies pupils are taught by professional boxing coaches and a former professional footballer, and at Key Stage 4 take a range of BTEC qualifications, such as in motor mechanics and

brick laying. Senior leaders are adamant that only good or outstanding teaching is acceptable.

From early in the process the leadership team and governors have taken a creative approach to the recruitment of staff, based on what they refer to as a 'family approach'. Several staff have held voluntary positions in the school prior to their appointment; others have had relatives who have attended or worked at the school; and recently several former pupils have been appointed to work with younger pupils and carry out general duties in the school. This has helped to improve the school's reputation in the local community and to ensure that those who are appointed have a reasonable idea of what is involved in working at the school. As well as family members being appointed, the 'family approach' also refers to the way in which staff support and help each other, particularly at stressful times. Initially this was assisted by the twice daily staff meetings – a briefing at the start of the day and a debrief at the end of the day – which greatly improved communication and provided a forum in which honesty and mutual support were carefully developed.

The leadership team is analytical and evaluative about the school. As a result, there is no complacency and there is an emphasis on continual improvement. Recent data about pupils' high failure rate on post-16 college courses, for example, has led the school to propose to the LA that they open a sixth form on site.

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