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Dear Mr Yerosimou

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 Mark Sims HMI on 17 October to look at work done to improve the school's overall effectiveness since it was placed in special measures in February 2003.

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, groups of students, representatives of the local authority and representatives of the governing body including the chair of governors. Other relevant documentation was scrutinised.

At the time of the inspection in 2001 there had been a high turnover of staff including the senior management team. The local authority's interim response was to place an acting headteacher and two deputies into the school. The school was judged to be underachieving. One of the acting deputies was appointed as the substantive headteacher in January 2002 and proceeded to take the lead in driving improvement. The headteacher had a clear view of

the leadership structure and roles required, and skilfully built a team through external recruitment, and by identifying potential within the school. The team started to address weaknesses in planning, staffing, teaching, leadership and student behaviour.

Although some progress had been made leading to the inspection in 2003 there had been insufficient time to address the legacy of underachievement and low standards, and the school was placed in special measures. This galvanised the staff to reflect critically on the strengths and weaknesses within the school. A wide consultation to agree the vision and aims for the school strengthened the community ethos, raised expectations and instilled a confidence in the school's capacity to build a stronger learning culture. This triggered an improvement in communications and the sharing of information across the school. The statement of action by the local authority cemented the links with the school leading to greater collaboration.

Work initially focused on two key areas, firstly to address the behaviour, attitudes, and high exclusion rates of students which were impacting on learning. Consultation with staff and students on a new behaviour policy supported by training in behaviour management, a high visible presence, and rigorous monitoring led to rapid progress. Older students are very positive about the impact this had and the opportunities to have their say. They feel that this led to greater respect and improved relationships with staff which they value. All stakeholders recognised that the school was calmer, and provided a happier learning environment.

Improving teaching and learning was the second key area given that a third of teaching was judged to be unsatisfactory during the inspection. This was substantially reduced over the period of monitoring visits. The profile of teaching was also strengthened by opportunities to recruit new staff. Training linked to the national strategies improved the planning of lessons, and the use of assessment. This began to change the learning culture with the expectation that students participate in lessons, and become involved in a variety of activities to make them think. Staff were encouraged to take risks by trying new approaches, and latterly to utilise the potential of interactive whiteboards. Students commented that this had provided some better ways to learn, and that they felt challenged to work harder.

Mathematics was identified as a weaker subject but with intensive support involving modelling, coaching and support students became more interested and engaged. Key Stage 3 results have risen at both level 5+ and level 6+. This approach was rolled out to the other core areas supporting an upward trend in results. The school has continued to place a strong emphasis on the quality of teaching and learning within the core subjects with ongoing specialist input. The legacy of inconsistent teaching in the past has meant that standards have risen more slowly in Key Stage 4.

To support the consistency of judgements about teaching and learning a programme of observations was conducted with the support of LA advisors.

This helped the school to identify areas for professional development and to hone skills for providing effective feedback. The investment in professional development has been valued by staff and made an effective contribution to improvement through tailored programmes with a focus on teaching strategies, and good practice visits. These strategies have led to a general improvement in provision although over time tracking systems have enabled a sharper focus on vulnerable groups such as boys, gifted and talented, coasting girls, and disaffected students. Intervention, study support and special programmes have developed to reflect the school's approach to inclusion.

Observation and feedback from students has led to improvements within the curriculum. Alternative curriculum packages, vocational courses and links with local colleges have engaged students interests and had a significant impact on the proportion of student achieving 5 or more A*-G passes. The success in achieving specialist status in engineering in 2006 has provided an additional impetus for curriculum development, and links with industry.

Improvements have been underpinned by a highly structured and co-ordinated approach to planning and monitoring, supported by effective delegation which empowered staff. Staff recognised the importance of consistency across the school, and for policies to be implemented and monitored rigorously. Recruitment within and beyond the school has strengthened leadership which has also benefited from involvement in national senior and middle leadership programmes. Leaders and teams have taken greater responsibility within the improvement process which has been supported by an explicit calendar of activities, and meetings. Line management links are programmed and the analytical approach means that senior and middle leaders can identify strengths and weaknesses, monitor progress, and continue the drive for improvement.

The attitudes and behaviour of students have been transformed since the point of special measures as demonstrated in the pride now expressed in the school. Pupil voice has become a strong feature through the year and school councils with regular opportunities to contribute, and take responsibilities. Older students are very clear about the improvements that have been made in results, teaching and learning, and the impact that they have had in bringing about changes. Their status is enhanced by the involvement in discussions about the 'new' school building. The involvement of governors in school council meetings means that they are able to express their views about the school directly. Their perceptions of the school have changed radically from the time of special measures when they had little connection or loyalty with the school. Year 11 council representatives are very clear that now they want to inspire pupils in Years 5 and 6 to join the school to be successful, and to be excellent role models for the school community.

Perceptions of the school by parents and the local community have changed significantly since the time of special measures. This is demonstrated by the increase in local parents applying to join the school and improved

relationships with the community. This has been achieved partly through greater supervision at the beginning and end of the school day, and students remaining on site at lunchtime. In addition the profile has been raised through consultation events, the open door policy, links with primary schools, and regular promotion of the school's successes, and developments. Improvements made in sharing progress information, and targets with parents have raised expectations and aspirations, and this is confirmed by students.

The recent promotion of the deputy to the headteacher role has secured stability for the school. He has continued the open, evaluative and forward looking approach to improvement supported by regular external validation by the local authority. This approach means that there is an awareness of the challenges to be faced in raising standards further, and in securing consistency.

The school has been very successful in generating an enthusiasm and excitement about developments linked to the engineering specialist status, and new building.

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

Nada Trikić
Her Majesty's Inspector