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Mrs K Tate
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Dear Mrs Tate

Ofsted survey programme visit - National Strategies survey 2008-09

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 10 February 2009 to look at the impact of the National Strategy on raising standards and narrowing the attainment gap.

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit focused on the work of the National Strategy in improving outcomes for children and young people. The visit focused particularly on the school's view of the impact of the National Strategy and how this is evaluated.

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 schools 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 and three groups of pupils. Parts of three lessons were observed and relevant documentation was scrutinised.

Senior leaders consider that the National Strategies are only part of a range of external programmes that the school uses to enable it to narrow the achievement gap for the majority of its pupils who live in an area of great social and economic deprivation. The school's good range of external services, for example, the family support worker, makes a very valuable contribution to the school's success. The National Strategies are not perceived by the school as driving improvement, but that some of their programmes are helpful and can be adopted to facilitate the work of teachers. School leaders believe that the most effective programmes have been the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, Wave 2 and 3 interventions for pupils who have difficulties learning English and mathematics. The local authority Developing Confident Communicators programme that tailors National

Strategy language programmes to the needs of a group of identified schools where children's language skills are well below average on entry is judged to be effective. The school uses the frameworks for English and mathematics and assessment for learning, but is not convinced that they have led to an improvement in standards. The school has a good relationship with the local authority and has benefited from inclusion in some programmes.

Lesson observations support the school's view that the National Strategies makes a contribution to teaching and learning. For example, in one mathematics lesson Year 1 pupils of all abilities were involved in open-ended problem solving activities. Assessment information was used very well to tailor the activities to the needs of five different groups. One teacher commented that the numeracy framework had raised her awareness of the importance of problem solving in mathematics and that she was changing her teaching in order to improve her practise. Teachers have worked hard to develop pupils' speaking and listening skills because on entry to school they are well below average. The importance of this has been long established in school so that the National Strategies contribute to the school's continued success. In all three lessons spanning the full age range in school, the progress that pupils made was extremely rapid and standards in Year 2 were impressive considering their starting points. The use of the 'Talking Tables' activity observed in the reception class successfully enabled children to rehearse narrative and develop speaking skills in an innovative, enjoyable and imaginative way. Behaviour in all the lessons was good and some pupils who find it difficult to behave appropriately were well managed by skilled teaching assistants. SEAL has made a good contribution to this.

The school's very accurate data supported by analysis from Durham University shows that on entry children's skill development is well below the expected level. This profile declines each year. Standards by the end of Year 2 have been consistently average in recent years. The school is successfully harnessing the support of a number of external initiatives, including the National Strategies, to ensure that pupils' progress accelerates each year to compensate for lower starting points. School assessments of behaviour show that with the introduction of SEAL, conduct, emotional behaviour and learning behaviour has improved in the last two years.

I hope you find this feedback useful.

Ofsted gathers information on the immediate and longer-term impact of survey inspections, both on the institutions themselves, and with a view to improving its own processes. To this end, I should be grateful if you would complete the attached questionnaire and return it within the next ten days. We have also just sent a copy of the questionnaire by email. Please return your completed questionnaire to either the email or postal address on the form, not to me. We may also contact some schools by telephone after several months in order for us to gain a picture of longer-term impact. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

As I explained in my previous letter, 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

Tim Bristow
Her Majesty's Inspector