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Bradley Simmons HMI
Regional Director, South East

12 April 2016

Helen McMullen
Director of Children, Education and Early Help Services
Reading Borough Council

Sent by email to: helen.mcmullen@reading.gov.uk

Dear Helen

GCSE achievement in 2015

Following my recent appointment as Regional Director, South East, I write to share my concern about GCSE results achieved by secondary schools in Reading in 2015. The low achievement of pupils entitled to free school meals causes me particular alarm. Reading's results show a wide and worsening gap between the achievement of these pupils and their more advantaged peers locally and nationally.

Ofsted has written to the Council about this gap in the past and been told that outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals were a top priority and that matters would improve. You will therefore share my disappointment that GCSE performance for this group in Reading is now the worst in the South East region.

Generally, the performance of Reading secondary schools is not strong. The overall percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics fell from 59.3% in 2014 to 57.5% in 2015. This decline is of concern, but is completely overshadowed by the shocking fall in the GCSE performance of pupils eligible for free school meals. In 2014, 30.7% of these pupils achieved five GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics; in 2015, only 23.8% achieved this level. I know you will agree that a 6.9 percentage point drop is unacceptable. Currently, the achievement of pupils eligible for free school meals at GCSE in Reading is ranked at 141 out of the 149 local authorities nationally. With fewer than a quarter gaining these basic qualifications upon which to build post-16, the future is bleak for these young people.

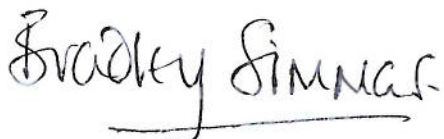
Recent inspections of secondary schools in Reading give little cause for optimism. Two of these, Reading Girls' School and John Madejski Academy, are now in special measures. Clearly much more needs to be done to increase the level of challenge and support for secondary schools and academies in the area. In the recent past,

Ofsted has publicly expressed concern about the performance of Reading primary schools, notably following a focused inspection of schools in October 2014. I know you have taken steps to improve the situation and the number of primary schools in a category of concern has reduced from six in October 2014 to one in February 2016. However, I am concerned that the problem has simply been transferred to the secondary phase, where pupils eligible for free school meals are being hit the hardest.

With an increasing proportion of schools operating as academies, including one of those in Reading recently placed in special measures, the responsibility for driving improvement does not rest solely with the local authority. Nevertheless, I trust you will recognise that, whether pupils attend an academy or a maintained school, the local authority has a key responsibility to act as a champion for its most vulnerable pupils. My predecessor, Sir Robin Boshier, has already met with the Regional Schools Commissioner to discuss academies in Reading where performance is a concern. I would be grateful if you would consider, with headteachers, officers and councillors, how Reading will demonstrate the political will necessary to raise the aspirations of, and improve outcomes for, your most vulnerable pupils, and to outline in writing to me how you will spearhead actions to address this serious situation.

I very much look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bradley Simmons". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Bradley Simmons HMI
Regional Director, South East

Recipients:

Local Members of Parliament
Cabinet Member Schools Portfolio
Managing Director, Reading Borough Council
Director of Children, Education and Early Help Services, Reading Borough Council
Regional Schools Commissioner

cc. Department for Education