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Thursday 11 November 2010

Mr Robert Whatmough  
St Neots Community College  
Barford Road  
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St Neots  
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Dear Mr Whatmough

**Special measures: monitoring inspection of St Neots Community College**

Following my visit to your college on Tuesday 9 November 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the fourth monitoring inspection since the college became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in March 2009. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection are set out in the annex to this letter. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – good.

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Director of Children's Services for Cambridgeshire.

Yours sincerely

David Jones  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

## **Annex**

### **The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in March 2009**

- Raise standards and achievement by ensuring realistic, but challenging targets are used effectively by all staff to secure rapid improvement.
- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring teachers consistently:
  - use a range of activities which challenge and motivate and meet the needs of all students
  - provide students with clear information on how well they are achieving and what they need to do to improve for example through the marking of books.
- Improve overall attendance and reduce the level of persistent absence by targeting strategies particularly in Years 10 and 11.
- Improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the evaluation of the college's performance by managers at all levels by:
  - ensuring inadequacies are clearly identified and eliminated
  - making effective use of clear success criteria for evaluating the impact of interventions on improving students' standards, achievement and well-being.

## **Special measures: monitoring of St Neots Community College**

### **Report from the fourth monitoring inspection on Tuesday 9 November 2010**

#### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the college's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Executive Principal, nominated staff, representatives of the governing body, students and a representative from the local authority. A telephone interview was conducted with the National Challenge Adviser.

#### **Context**

The Longsands Learning Partnership, a federation between Longsands College and St Neots Community College, became operational from 1 September 2010. St Neots college gained foundation status on that day and the Principal of Longsands College became the Executive Principal. A federation governing body became operational on 1 September, assuming responsibility for both colleges.

The Vice Principal of St Neots Community College was appointed as college director at the start of the academic year; other senior staff assumed responsibilities in a new leadership structure. A Deputy Principal and 10 staff left at the end of the summer term in the context of this reorganisation.

#### **Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning**

The provisional results of the 2010 public examinations continue a steady trend of improvement. The proportion of students obtaining five higher grade GCSE examinations, including English and mathematics, improved to 36% although the proportion gaining five A\*- G grades has, at 87%, remained stable; GCSE results improved in English, mathematics, science and a number of other subjects. However, overall outcomes as measured in terms of average points scored and educational value added are likely to remain below average.

Current attainment is notably higher than in previous years. The students now in Year 11 have already secured positive results in a number of subjects, including Maths, BTEC and diploma courses. For example, 71% have gained a higher level pass in their first maths module and 25% have secured an A or A\*. These improvements are a result of curriculum enhancements introduced since the last inspection. The standard of the students' work noted on this inspection was appropriate in nine out of ten lessons.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and achievement by ensuring realistic, but challenging targets are used effectively by all staff to secure rapid improvement – satisfactory.

### **Other relevant pupil outcomes**

A noticeable improvement in behaviour was evident throughout this visit. Students were cooperative in lessons and responded well to the college's high expectations. Movement around the college was calm and polite; students arrived on time for their lessons and brought with them a positive attitude to learning.

Attendance has continued to improve with the final figures for 2009/10 in line with those of secondary colleges nationally. This represents a 7% increase on the 2007/8 figure and is a significant achievement.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Improve overall attendance and reduce the level of persistent absence by targeting strategies particularly in Years 10 and 11 – good.

Progress on the priorities for further improvement given at a previous monitoring visit:

- Provide clear behaviour and punctuality expectations and protocols – good.

### **The effectiveness of provision**

Lesson observations carried out during the inspection endorse the college's view that the quality of teaching is good or better in 58% of lessons; this is an improvement since the last monitoring inspection. A key strength seen in the better lessons but also evident in other lessons was the standard of student behaviour, their improved attitude to and engagement in learning.

Another strong feature of the better lessons is the positive relationships between students and adults. Teachers and support staff seek to enhance the confidence of students, nurturing those who are unsure of how to engage with tasks and those who need support or encouragement to move to the next level. Sensitivity to students' needs was also evident, for example, when taking advanced level biology students through the awe, wonder and horror of dissecting a sheep's heart to ensure a skilful outcome. Learning in these better lessons is structured effectively so that students gain knowledge and confidence through the lesson. Planning is carefully staged, developing the theme of the lesson towards well thought-out learning outcomes. Expectations are high and students are given challenging tasks. Questions are carefully targeted at individual students and linked to planned outcomes.

Where teaching is less effective, questioning fails to include all students and there are too few opportunities for students to share their thoughts with their peers. Although lesson planning included both learning objectives and outcomes, these failed to specify clearly what students are expected to learn or how to be successful. Some tasks occupied students rather than enhancing their learning or promoting student progress.

A number of lessons could have secured a more positive outcome if time management had been more effective, resources had been checked beforehand, and teachers had modelled how to carry out the work to a high standard. At times a lack of staff subject knowledge limited the effectiveness of teaching.

The college has emphasised the need for consistency in marking and feedback. Most marking is skilful and considerably enhances students' learning. However, the college is accurate in its evaluation that some variation still exists within departments.

Teacher assessment of student progress is now effective and teachers are accurately predicting final student outcomes. The college now has a robust database which enables it to effectively track student progress. Assessments are carried regularly and most but not all staff are using this information to plan learning. Senior leaders are using the information effectively to identify potential underachievement and plan suitable interventions.

The college has continued to expand the range of vocational courses provided and the first published results from these new courses have all been positive. Students respond well to the practical application of knowledge required and the results of these curriculum developments are beginning to raise standards.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the quality of teaching by ensuring teachers consistently:
  - use a range of activities which challenge and motivate and meet the needs of all students
  - provide students with clear information on how well they are achieving and what they need to do to improve for example through the marking of books – satisfactory.

Progress on the priorities for further improvement given at the last monitoring visit:

- Improve students' progress in all subjects by developing a robust assessment data base that will enable effective monitoring by senior staff – good.
- Improve the vocational provision available to help address the achievement and attendance issues that remain – good.

## **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

The senior management team has done well to improve behaviour and punctuality, enhance provision and improve teaching. The college now functions appropriately on a day-to-day basis and the impact of stronger systems and protocols has been at the core of the real improvement seen by inspectors.

The senior leadership team has an accurate view of the strengths and areas requiring development in teaching and learning. Their high expectations are communicated clearly and professional development is based on sound evidence. A wide range of staff joined inspectors in the joint observation of teaching and the views they expressed concurred with the judgements given by the inspection team. This accurate appraisal of teaching and learning is a strength of the senior team.

The Longsands Learning Partnership and the work of the Executive Principal has been vital in mentoring and developing the work of the senior management team. The Executive Principal and his senior team have embedded ambition and the driven improvement that is enabling the college to make good progress.

The governing body of the Longsands Learning Partnership has provided a stable structure that has introduced in-depth monitoring; this is providing effective challenge and a strong base of accurate information.

Progress since the last monitoring inspection on the areas for improvement:

- Improve the accuracy and effectiveness of the evaluation of the college's performance by managers at all levels by:
  - ensuring inadequacies are clearly identified and eliminated
  - making effective use of clear success criteria for evaluating the impact of interventions on improving students' standards, achievement and well-being – good.

## **External support**

The local authority has provided particularly helpful and flexible support across the full range of issues raised by the inspection in March 2009 and during subsequent monitoring visits. The very significant financial support provided has helped the college balance the budget and supported the restructuring of secondary provision in the town. The range of governor support provided to the Longsands Learning Partnership has been instrumental in the smooth transition to the new governance arrangements within the federation. The manner in which the local authority support has been developed has been outstanding.

The National Challenge Adviser has worked hard to support the major changes introduced by the college but it is vital that future challenge and support is clearly focused on the agenda HMI has discussed with the college as it moves towards the removal of special measures.