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Mr J Whelan
Headteacher
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Letchworth
Hertfordshire
SG6 4BA

Dear Mr Whelan

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Fearnhill School

Following my visit with David Gutmann, additional inspector, to your school on 28 and 29 November 2011, 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 second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place on 2 February 2011. The full list of the areas for improvement which were identified during that inspection is 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.

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed as needed across different subjects, subject to the following qualification:

- the school ensures appropriate and sustained mentoring and support by members of the senior leadership team.

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 Hertfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Davinder Dosanjh
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2011

- Raise the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE subjects at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, by February 2012 and ensure that all students accelerate their achievement in Key Stages 4 and 5 through a clear strategy that results in:
 - improving the quality of lesson planning, especially in English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology, ensuring that learning objectives and activities are better matched to students' needs
 - a greater focus on academic guidance, assessment techniques and checks on students' understanding and learning through effective questioning and detailed feedback
 - a greater drive on the quality and volume of work produced by students in class and out of lessons
 - an appropriate pace of learning, greater challenge, and where necessary effective learning support for individual students
 - a curriculum that meets students' needs more fully at all levels, ensuring that they achieve their potential in school and in off-site provision.

- Develop the capacity of leaders, managers and the governing body to improve the school by:
 - strengthening the consistency and robustness of monitoring of the quality of teaching, of assessment, and scrutiny of students' work by all leaders and managers
 - raising staff expectations of what students can achieve and ensuring a greater focus on students' learning and progress in lessons in line with their needs
 - developing self-critical evaluation processes at all levels of the school that enable staff to take greater accountability for students' outcomes.

- Accelerate achievement and raise aspirations in the sixth form through greater rigour in monitoring, evaluating and planning of the provision.

Special measures: monitoring of Fearnhill School

Report from the second monitoring inspection on 28–29 November 2011

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior leaders, groups of students, members of the governing body, and a representative from the local authority.

Context

Since the previous monitoring visit 11 staff have left the school and nine have joined. A director of learning for the English faculty has been appointed for January 2012 and in the meantime the deputy headteacher is temporarily overseeing the work of the faculty. The business studies and information and communication technology (ICT) departments have merged into one faculty.

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

Unvalidated national data for 2011, backed up by the school's own data, indicate that attainment is improving and broadly average, and several indicators show improvement when compared to 2010. A higher percentage of students than in the previous year gained five GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics, and two A* to C grades in science. However, the percentage of students attaining five A* to G grades fell, as did the percentage gaining one A* to G grade. Students made satisfactory progress in mathematics. While attainment is improving in English, there is still some underachievement. Variability of performance remains across subjects, but 10 subjects improved their performance in 2011. Results in ICT were disappointing. Indian students continue to achieve well. Girls outperform boys on key measures. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those known to be eligible for free school meals performed below targets.

Evidence from this visit indicates that students are now making at least satisfactory progress, with an increasing number making good progress. Students' books show steady progress with more work being completed. A minority of students have not completed sufficient work over time. Students are responsive to their teachers' encouragement and are willing learners when they have the opportunity to engage fully in lessons. Learning is good when there is an element of independence and challenge.

Inspectors found robust evidence during the monitoring visit that the achievement and aspirations of sixth form students are good overall, showing significant improvement from the last inspection. The school's data show that nearly half of the students gained higher grades at A* to B in 2011, from less than a third in 2009.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance remains above the national average. Students commented positively on a number of improvements. The amount of homework has increased, books are marked more regularly and they know how well they are doing. Behaviour has improved with fewer interruptions to lessons as students know the consequences. Behaviour around the school is orderly. In the most effective lessons, students are enthusiastic and good behaviour and positive attitudes to learning are making a stronger contribution to good learning. In a few lessons behaviour is not managed effectively and students are disengaged because the teaching is not sufficiently engaging or challenging. Passive behaviour in lessons is a barrier to progress.

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

- raise the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE subjects at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, by February 2012 and ensure that all students accelerate their achievement in Key Stages 4 and 5 through a clear strategy – satisfactory.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors visited 21 lessons and conducted all observations of lessons jointly with senior managers, whose views agreed with those of the inspectors. No inadequate lessons were seen. This is an improvement from the previous monitoring visit. Staff commitment to continually improving their practice is having a clear impact cross the school. To ensure consistency of judgements, there are regular joint observations of class teachers by faculty leaders working with senior managers. The school has identified several areas to improve, such as planning and assessment, and provided appropriate additional training for all staff and coaching sessions for those staff whose have taught satisfactory rather than good lessons.

The quality of teaching and learning seen during the monitoring visit was good overall, with nearly two thirds of lessons seen being good or outstanding; in the sixth form all lessons were good or better. Teaching improves as students move up the school and there is a higher proportion of satisfactory lessons in Years 7 to 9.

Improvements noted by inspectors since the last monitoring visit include: detailed lesson planning; higher expectations by teachers; better behaviour management; an increase in pace and challenge in most lessons; better use of questioning techniques; frequent checks on learning; regular setting of homework tasks; and, above all, better marking and assessment techniques using the school's marking policy. These improvements are clearly starting to have a good impact on achievement. However, there is still some inconsistency in marking within and across subjects and sometimes teachers do not follow up the comments they have made to help students improve their work. Tasks in lessons now meet the needs of students better, helped by training and the increasing involvement of learning support staff in

lesson planning, but do not yet fully match the needs and abilities of the least able and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Extension activities are increasingly being set for more-able students. Discussions with students indicated that they appreciated the support teachers gave, and knew the levels or grades they were working at and how to improve them. Sometimes the targets set for students are not high enough.

There are clearly improvements in lesson planning for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The curriculum in all years is now more appropriate, for example in the provision made for vocational education and a reduced GCSE workload for those students who cannot cope with the full programme. Learning support staff are being deployed more effectively in lessons, and have contributed well to planning tasks that better meet students' needs. As yet outcomes for less-able students are still not high enough, although they are steadily improving. There is a greater focus on literacy cross the curriculum and many lessons focus on subject-specific key words. There is insufficient focus on presentation in books and correct spellings.

The use of off-site provision had been reduced because it did not provide students with appropriate qualifications. Students in Key Stage 4 are no longer doing two ICT qualifications. Instead, they are all doing one which is appropriate to their needs and abilities. In the sixth form the extended project qualification has been introduced and 19 students are studying it.

Sixth form students comment extremely positively on the support provided by teachers and other staff, and the opportunity they are given to play a full part in the school, helping younger students with personal issues, sports coaching and reading, for example. Students appreciate the more robust private study arrangements, and there is good evidence that students are able to work more independently and confidently on their projects.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The headteacher has continued to implement a number of appropriate measures to drive improvement, at a good pace. Weak performance is challenged and staff are supported to improve. The headteacher is maximising the use of partnerships to support staff training and development. Senior leaders have focused sharply on the school's priorities, and strategies are having a clear impact on key areas of the school's work, most notably the quality of teaching and learning. Regular teaching and learning walks have ensured that senior leaders have an accurate view of teaching and learning in the school. The focus on training and supporting staff is clearly evident in lessons. The school is rigorously tracking students' progress and the performance of different groups of students. The school is honest and correct in its self-assessment and clearly knows its strengths and areas for development.

Significant progress has been made since it went into special measures. The key building blocks provide a strong platform to accelerate further improvement.

Subject leaders are playing an increasingly key role in monitoring and evaluating their faculty areas. The headteacher and the school's improvement partner held individual meetings with each subject leader to evaluate the outcomes of the summer examinations. This has provided additional challenge and accountability to subject leaders, who have a secure understanding of data and performance and their roles and responsibilities. They have a shared understanding of their role in school improvement and self-evaluation. The new faculty of business and ICT is leading to the sharing of good practice within the team.

The governing body has created a suitable committee structure. This is enabling its members to become more effective in holding the school to account. They are highly committed to continuing improvement and have increased their visibility around the school. They are working with the Chair of the Governing Body from another Hertfordshire school to take them through an exercise in self-evaluation review and develop their procedures.

Significant improvement has been made in the sixth form, and this is largely due to stronger leadership and management, under the control of a senior leader. A number of initiatives have led to these improvements, including a more rigorously applied entry policy and closer partnership with a neighbouring school. The implementation of the school's new assessment policy and better availability of tracking data to help teachers monitor students' progress are leading to coordinated and appropriate intervention strategies to support students. Lessons in the sixth form are overwhelmingly good, and sometimes outstanding.

The specialist mathematics and computing college status is beginning to make an impact on raising whole-school attainment, particularly in mathematics.

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

- develop the capacity of leaders, managers and the governing body to improve the school – good
- accelerate achievement and raise aspirations in the sixth form through greater rigour in monitoring, evaluating and planning of the provision – good.

External support

The school continues to receive good support from the local authority through its improvement advisers, subject consultants and local partner schools. This has supported the work in the core subjects, special educational needs and the sixth form, and in addition has helped to develop teaching and learning. Subject leaders value this support and it has enabled the school to improve at a quicker pace. A National Leader in Education from an outstanding Hertfordshire school has been

supporting the headteacher in developing a more rigorous and robust approach to school leadership through a mentoring and coaching programme. This has been very beneficial.