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Balraj Hare
The Principal
Sandy Upper School
Engayne Avenue
Sandy
SG19 1BL

Dear Ms Hare

Special measures monitoring inspection of Sandy Upper School

Following my visit with Alan Jarvis and Natasha Campbell, Additional Inspectors, to your school on the 02–03 October 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in February 2013. 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.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of special measures.

The local authority's statement of action is fit for purpose.

The school may appoint newly qualified teachers without reservation before the next monitoring inspection.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published 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 Central Bedfordshire.

Yours sincerely

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in February 2013

- Improve teaching so that it is good or better by ensuring that all teachers:
 - always insist on high standards of work and behaviour
 - plan lessons at the right level for all students, particularly disabled students and those who have special educational needs
 - use a greater variety of learning activities to inspire and motivate students to achieve high standards
 - regularly check students' understanding in lessons and adjust the work if it is too hard or too easy
 - mark students' work consistently and set clear targets for further improvement that are always followed up
 - give students regular opportunities in all subjects to check their own and each other's work.

- Improve achievement, particularly in English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
 - teachers have detailed information on students' achievement in reading, writing and speaking and listening, so they can match teaching accurately to individual students' skills and abilities in each of these areas
 - effective support is given to students who find reading difficult
 - all students have secure skills in basic numeracy, and these skills are systematically and regularly developed
 - disabled students and those who have special educational needs receive consistently good support from all teachers and teaching assistants, both in lessons and when working individually or in small groups
 - attendance improves, particularly for disabled students and those who have special educational needs, and students supported through the pupil premium.

- Improve leadership and management by:
 - checking teaching rigorously to ensure it is consistently good or better in all lessons
 - making sure that all teachers are fully trained to teach reading, writing communication and mathematical skills in all subjects
 - setting demanding but achievable targets for students' progress in reading and checking regularly that they have been met
 - regularly holding the leaders of subjects and year groups to account for students' attainment, progress and attendance in their areas

- developing the leadership of the sixth form in holding teachers to account for their students' performance and tackling any underachievement
 - ensuring that the subjects taught in the main school and in the sixth form fully meet students' needs and interests.
- Improve governance by ensuring the governing body:
- holds leaders at all levels to account more rigorously for students' performance and the quality of teaching
 - makes sure that financial resources, including pupil premium funding, are managed effectively and that the impact of this funding is evaluated
 - commissions an external review of governance.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 02–03 October 2013.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, other senior staff, groups of students, parents and staff, members of Executive Improvement Board, a representative from the local authority, and the joint chief executives of the preferred sponsors Barnfield Federation.

Inspectors visited 34 lessons, conducted 10 joint observations with senior managers and representatives from the Barnfield Teaching School team who are currently supporting the school; all teachers were offered professional feedback. HMI led a round-table discussion of the quality of teaching, reviewed the school's monitoring of teaching and standards, and the professional development support provided by the senior team.

Context

The Barnfield Federation of Academies, the preferred sponsors, is in protracted final negotiations with the local authority. These proposals will then go forward for ministerial approval.

An interim principal, supported by a small team of consultants, managed the school during the summer term and initiated some of the recovery work required. The Barnfield Federation appointed a principal designate and a small senior team; they began work on 1 August 2013 and moved into the school as to the new leadership team on the 1 September. Six new teachers have been appointed on permanent contracts.

Achievement of pupils at the school

The 2013 public examinations at both GCSE and A level were a catalogue of underachievement clearly related to the weaknesses in teaching and leadership identified in the previous inspection report.

Inspectors reviewed the current work in the students' books and noted significant improvements in the presentation and completion of work – early impact of the drive for higher standards insisted upon by senior staff.

Students made good or better progress in two thirds of the lessons evaluated by the inspection team, a notable improvement on that recorded during the first HMI monitoring visit. Standards are clearly rising because of the improvements secured in the quality of teaching and the increased challenge provided in lessons. Students

were quick to praise the improvement in teaching, marking and homework explaining that it made them feel responsible for their own learning.

At the start of term, standards remained low as a result of the legacy of the former ineffective provision and leadership. Every aspect of the previous inspection report's second area for improvement (achievement) has been tackled with vision and vigour. As a result, standards are rising rapidly and significant progress is clearly recorded in the students' current work.

The quality of teaching

The improvement in teaching secured since the previous inspection, the summer term monitoring visit and, particularly, since the beginning of term is impressive. It is clearly evident in the students' work where high-quality marking is securing rapid improvement in the quality of work accepted and the accuracy of students' responses to challenging questions.

HMI spoke with many students and all were impressed by the 'better teaching' they were experiencing and noted, 'It makes you want to do well.'

In the best lessons, high-quality questions set the context for challenging tasks, and well-targeted support secured rapid improvements from the student's personal starting points. For example, outstanding teaching in a Year 11 mathematics lesson made the analysis of carefully marked homework the starting point of a series of brisk tasks particularly well matched to individual learning needs. A demanding mid-point plenary session drew accurate and articulate responses from the students and prepared the way for a demanding investigation into algebra.

Similarly, in a fascinating Year 13 drama lesson, the students conducted an imaginative review of the performance styles required by the examination syllabus. A student led the session, video review was used for self-evaluation and the class teacher took the role of an executive director, nurturing ideas and individual development.

All lessons laid important emphasis on students' using the correct vocabulary when responding to questions. As a result, when working together or in small groups small but intense subject-specific conversations developed that took learning forward. For example, in a successful Year 9 science lesson, careful questioning reminded pupils of their previous biology topic and secured a conceptual understanding of how food poisoning was related to poor hygiene before initiating a practical session to measure the bacteria on human skin. In all of these lessons the teacher's language and the way the topic was introduced captured the students' imagination.

Where some lessons required improvement, weaknesses related to the lack of relevant examples of the topic being studied that could, otherwise, have provided access to the conceptual understanding required.

The school's new assessment system is used effectively to gather accurate data from the high-quality marking now evident in every lesson. Teachers plan well-structured lessons from this starting point. The very significant improvement in teaching is enabling pupils who find learning difficult and those in need of additional support to close the gap in attainment with their peers.

As with achievement, every aspect of the improvements required by the previous inspection report have been worked on successfully. Good teaching is now available in all year groups and every subject area, two thirds of the teaching and learning in the lessons seen were good or better and one quarter were outstanding.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour around the school site and in its extensive network of corridors is good. Students are punctual and lessons begin on time. However, more impressive is the students' very positive attitudes to learning. All students the inspectors spoke to were keen to speak about the 'huge differences since September', the way they were 'spoken to as adults' and how they had been convinced that 'getting good grades in your exams' was important. A number of boys referred to, 'Looking smart in these uniforms makes you want to do well.' One sixth form student noted, with a wry smile on his face, that he now came to school in a suit because, 'I can't have Year 11 looking better than me!'

Students explained that behaviour on the way to school was better and they felt safer because they could recognise other students because of their uniform. Many were very pleased with the mixed-age tutor groups, and younger students commented that seeing older individuals you could 'say hello to' as you moved around the school gave you confidence.

Parents said they have been amazed by the change in attitudes to learning of their own children and one mother noted, 'He won't take his uniform off until he has finished his homework!' Other parents noted that the good behaviour of Sandy students in their new uniforms was spoken about positively in the town. Attendance has risen since the beginning of term and there have been no exclusions – a very significant improvement on the corresponding period of the previous school year. The school's safer recruitment procedures are very well organised

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

It is hard to imagine what more the school's senior leaders could have done in the five weeks since the start of the school year. The impact and dedication of the

leadership team has been outstanding. Staff were keen to describe how they had been given confidence, support and challenge since the beginning of term and established colleagues noted they had never known the staff so positive. The clarity of the targets set was viewed positively and staff spoke eloquently regarding the positive change in the students' attitudes to learning, 'We can get on and teach now.' Asked what was needed next, the overwhelming view was, 'We need the academy transition to happen so we can express our view of the plan and become an academy before Christmas.'

School improvement planning is of a very-high order with the improvement in standards and achievement the absolute foci of every aspect of the school's development. Important curriculum changes were brought in at the start of term and the school has reacted sensibly to the recent government directive on early examination entry.

The Executive Improvement Board have a strong grasp of the improvements secured and fully support the principal's ambitious plans to become an outstanding secondary school as soon as possible. Representatives from the sponsors, Barnfield Federation, are fully involved in the work of the governing body and well-conceived plans have been agreed for the connections to be made between the local governing body and the federation when the school secures academy status.

A group of students asked to speak directly to HMI and their enthusiasm for the school, the changes secured and the positive impact on their lives was very impressive. One young man synthesised the views of the group when he explained: 'Teaching is better; behaviour is better; we are spoken to as adults; we are proud of our school and our uniform – the people who are leading the school know what they are doing!'

The school is running very effectively as an academy in all but name. However, the lack of agreement between the local authority and the sponsors on the final financial settlement is depriving the school of access to much needed redevelopment funds.

External support

The local authority moved swiftly to provide an experienced interim leadership team following the previous inspection. Important changes were introduced during the summer term but the impact of the 2013 examination results was limited. The more recent support from local authority commissioned consultants has been of negligible value, with both governors and the local authority expressing their disquiet at the poor quality review of governance.

The current leadership team has been brought together by the Barnfield Federation with additional support provided from the federation's resources; the impact of this leadership team and the support it has commissioned has been immense. In the

remaining weeks before academisation the local authority's planned reviews of progress are an unnecessary distraction for governors and the leadership team.

- As a matter of urgency, conclude the negotiations between the local authority and the preferred sponsors Barnfield Federation.
- Due to the success of the leadership team's school improvement strategy, the governing body and the local authority should suspend the programme of consultancy evaluations, made in response to that area for improvement identified in the previous inspection, which are unnecessarily taking up vital leadership time.