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5 December 2013

Mr Peter Collins
Headteacher
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Neville Duke Road
Farnborough
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Dear Mr Collins

Special measures monitoring inspection of Fernhill School

Following my visit with additional inspectors Margaret Faull and Charlotte Evers to your school on 3 and 4 December 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 third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures following the inspection which took place in September 2012. 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 school may appoint newly qualified teachers 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 Hampshire.

Yours sincerely

Chris Wood
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in September 2012

- Ensure that students' achievement and the quality of teaching are good or better by:
 - checking that teachers match their lesson planning to the needs of all students
 - making sure that students' targets are challenging
 - ensuring that teachers have high expectations of students' capabilities
 - making sure that teachers check carefully in lessons that students are making good progress.
- Ensure senior and middle leaders hold teachers to account for students' progress by:
 - using the new Teachers' Standards to monitor teaching in relation to students' achievement
 - making sure that staff receive training and support in the areas where they need help the most.
- Strengthen the role of the governing body in checking the school's performance and in holding senior leaders to account.
- Ensure that teachers enable students to take an active part in lessons by:
 - providing regular opportunities for them to share their views and respond to teachers' questions
 - make sure that students are given opportunities to work with other students and be expected to take responsibility for completing their own work.

Report on the third monitoring inspection on 3 and 4 December 2013

Evidence

Inspectors observed parts of 30 lessons. Nineteen lesson observations were conducted jointly with senior leaders. Inspectors observed two senior leaders giving feedback to staff. They scrutinised a range of documents, including the school's self-evaluation, its improvement plan and records of performance management. They also looked at information about students' achievement, behaviour and attendance. Inspectors met with the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, four members of the governing body, two representatives from the local authority and a small group of parents and carers. Inspectors talked to students in lessons, observed an assembly and met with representative groups of students from Years 7, 9 and 10.

Context

A number of staff started in September, including a deputy headteacher and the head of science. Several new staff started in English and mathematics. Since the previous visit, there has been extensive refurbishment of the school environment. The school has relocated some subject areas so that most teaching in a particular subject is now located in one place.

Achievement of pupils at the school

Unvalidated examination results for 2013 indicate that the proportion of students in Year 11 that achieved five GCSEs at grades A* to C including English and mathematics was similar to 2012 and much lower than the national average. Nevertheless, the progress made by these students, albeit below average, was much better than for the previous year. In English, the proportion of students making expected progress increased by 10% and the proportion making more than expected progress doubled. Gains in mathematics were more modest. Although the attainment of students receiving free school meals fell, they had also made better progress from their lower starting points than similar pupils the year before.

Leaders have analysed the results for Year 11 thoroughly and have made decisive changes on the basis of the lessons learned. They have strengthened assessment processes and the monitoring of progress so that any future 'mismatch' between students' attainment in mathematics and English is minimised. Inspection evidence and the school's increasingly reliable information about current achievement indicate that the rate of progress made by students across the school is accelerating. Many students, particularly those in Key Stage 3, are beginning to catch-up on their past underachievement. Nevertheless, leaders are rightly focused on ensuring that this trend of strong improvement continues, especially for more-able students and those that are eligible for free school meals.

The quality of teaching

Overall, the quality of teaching is improving and there has been a steady increase in the proportion of good and outstanding teaching. However, the rate of improvement varies across subject areas. Students told inspectors that, for the most part, teaching was more challenging and interesting. They particularly enjoyed lessons when they participate actively, when teachers' knowledge and enthusiasm 'sparks' their interest, and when new subjects are on offer as a result of the school's widening curriculum. Students identified inconsistencies in the quality of teaching but noted that this was less apparent than at the time of the last visit. Inspectors agree with this view.

Teachers have higher expectations about what students can and ought to achieve. Most plan lessons that better match the needs of students of different abilities. Activities are more closely linked to assessment criteria and students are given clearer advice on what they need to do in order to improve their work and achieve their more ambitious personal targets. Even so, in some lessons, teachers do not check sufficiently that students are making good progress in their learning. In these lessons, there is sometimes too much focus on task completion rather than the quality of work produced. Occasionally, there is a lack of urgency in lessons and students do not complete enough work in the time given. As a result, the planned opportunities for teachers and students to assess progress are limited.

The quality of teachers' questioning has improved. Students are generally more confident when speaking and respond positively when they are asked to justify their opinions or extend their ideas. In the best lessons, questions are used with precision to stretch students according to their ability. In an outstanding science lesson, for example, students made quick progress when learning about different types of energy because the teacher's excellent subject knowledge ensured that questions were varied, focused and challenging. In some lessons, the range and purpose of questions is more limited and, on occasions, discussions are poorly planned.

Students routinely learn in pairs and small groups, taking greater personal responsibility for their work. This often leads to higher levels of engagement and develops teamworking or leadership skills. For example, in a physical exercise lesson, students made good progress and displayed high levels of active enjoyment because they were well guided by the teacher and clearly understood their group roles as 'participants' or 'coaches'. However, in some lessons, group activities are less-well structured. In these lessons, students' progress is too slow and, on occasions, leads to low levels of disruptive behaviour.

The quality of leadership in and management of the school

The headteacher has been instrumental in ensuring that the school has improved strongly and that this improvement is accelerating. His ambition, commitment and

clarity of vision is shared by other leaders. Together, they have transformed the culture of the school. Recently appointed staff have been inducted successfully and helped to take up their roles and responsibilities quickly. They are beginning to have a positive impact on improving provision but will need time to embed before the full impact of their work can be seen on outcomes for students.

There has been a root and branch reform of performance management processes with much closer links between teachers' targets, students' achievement and the pay that teachers receive now in place. These processes are linked to a coherent programme of professional development. Teachers benefit from whole-school training, timetabled periods for self-directed work and peer observations, and cross-subject 'learning and development groups' that support teachers' individual training needs. Overall, these opportunities have improved the quality of teaching strongly, although the impact varies between teachers and across subjects.

The capacity of middle leaders has strengthened considerably. Overall, they are much clearer about their roles in raising achievement and holding teachers to account. They liaise regularly with each other. They are also working within their departments to systematically identify gaps in students' learning. This information is used to improve teaching and to plan well-targeted additional support. Some middle leaders have already adapted intervention programmes so that the right students get the right support at the right time. One group of middle leaders is also leading a project designed to raise the achievement of the most-able students in Year 11. Some of these innovative developments are relatively new. It will take time before leaders are able to fully assess the impact on raising achievement.

The Chair has played a pivotal role in strengthening the wider governing body. Governors understand their roles more fully and there is a closer match between their individual skills and the areas of the school's work they focus on. The governing body minutes show that governors routinely ask perceptive questions that hold leaders to account. Governors are now more actively involved in monitoring the school's performance. The role of the link governor has developed well and is now more systematic. Governors are acutely aware of the need to monitor closely the performance of different groups of students in the forthcoming Year 11 mock examinations.

Parents and carers have confidence in the headteacher and report considerable improvements under his tenure. They told inspectors that school staff take a stronger interest in their children's progress and personal well-being. They noted that communication between the home and school has improved and, where problems arise, they are usually dealt with quickly. Parents and carers were particularly pleased that homework now has a higher profile. They appreciated that they can check what homework has been set through the school's website but noted that, occasionally, teachers forget to update this information. Parents, carers and

students were positive about the improvements made to the learning environment and school uniform.

External support

Leaders and the local authority work in close cooperation. They have the very best interests of the school, its students and its community at heart. This positive yet robust relationship has underpinned the school's continued improvement. Together, they have a clear understanding of what steps the school should take next to ensure that recent developments are sustainable. Judicious support from local authority advisers and consultants has contributed to improvements in teaching and leadership capacity. For example, recent support for middle leaders has strengthened their understanding of the need to focus tenaciously on the achievement of different groups of pupils.