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31 March 2014

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

Dear Ms Hare

### **Special measures monitoring inspection of Sandy Upper School**

Following my visit with David Talbot, Additional Inspector, to your school on 27–28 March 2014, 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 on 13 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 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 Central Bedfordshire.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker  
**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 third monitoring inspection on 27–28 March 2014**

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, senior and middle leaders, a group of new staff (including newly qualified teachers), a group of support staff, groups of students, parents from the parent forum, members of Executive Improvement Board and a representative from the local authority. Inspectors visited 19 lessons; most teaching was observed jointly with senior or middle leaders.

### **Context**

Since the previous monitoring inspection in October, planned sponsorship arrangements under the Barnfield Federation of Academies have been terminated. An alternative sponsor has been sought, but the school's transition to academy status is unlikely to take place until September 2014. At the time of this visit, the Principal and four other senior leaders seconded from Barnfield were still in post but the substantive leadership appointments had not been made. A new Director of English took up post in January.

### **Achievement of pupils at the school**

By setting highly ambitious target grades across all subjects, the expectations of students and teachers have been raised in one fell swoop. Four levels of progress from Key Stage 2 to the end of Year 11 is established as the norm, and sixth form target grades have been stretched to provide additional challenge. Any scepticism about the unreality of such high aspirations has been erased by the sharp upturn in students' progress and the remarkable outcomes in the November GCSE examinations. The decision to retain early entry in English and mathematics was a deliberate strategy to raise expectations and demonstrate to students that they can achieve well. The great majority of Year 11 students sat their English GCSE and two-thirds of the cohort took mathematics. The results were spectacular: 89% of Year 11 students have already achieved at least a C grade in English (compared with 61% in August 2013), 64% have secured at least a C grade in both English and mathematics (compared with 54% in August 2013). Significantly, early entry has not led to underachievement. The vast majority of students made at least expected progress, and the proportion of A or A\* grades has already exceeded almost threefold the figures achieved in 2013. Attainment for key groups, such as students known to be eligible for free school meals and disabled students and those who have special educational needs, is significantly higher than in 2013. Students who have not yet hit their aspirational targets are determined to do even better in the summer.

School assessment data shows accelerated progress across all subjects and in all year groups. This improvement is already making up for previous deficits and should ensure that Year 11 students do not underachieve. Better achievement for all is also leading to a narrowing of the attainment gap for key groups: students known to be eligible for free school meals, disabled students and those who have special educational needs.

Evidence from students' books and from lesson observations supports the school's view that achievement is significantly better, including in the sixth form. Predictions for 2014 far exceed the results achieved in 2013 at GCSE, AS and A level.

### **The quality of teaching**

The transformation in students' achievement is rooted in more effective teaching and better use of assessment. Improvements in teaching, noted at the last visit, have been consolidated and expanded. Simple strategies, such as a 'no hands up' rule, have strengthened teaching by encouraging teachers to reflect on how they pose questions, and who they ask, to assess and extend students' learning. Similarly, prescribed seating plans ensure that teachers consider, in detail, the needs and aptitudes of each group and how these can be met. Teachers apply agreed routines to plan lessons and manage students' behaviour. This approach ensures consistency and encourages teachers to develop a range of different teaching styles. Students appreciate this variety. They say they enjoy taking an active part in lessons and like not having to copy from the board, as they used to be the case last year.

Teachers have embraced the higher expectations exacted by senior leaders, and are keen to improve their effectiveness by deploying a wide range of techniques to engage students and promote their learning. Tasks are carefully prepared and well timed. For example, setting Year 10 students a mathematical treasure hunt challenged them to complete a series of calculations, and built their confidence; giving Year 12 biology students a complex sorting exercise quickly consolidated their prior learning and highlighted possible gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

Almost all the priorities for improving teaching have been effectively addressed, but marking is a notable exception. Marking is completed conscientiously but it does not do enough to steer improvement because students are not routinely expected to read or respond to the guidance given. Some teachers do not take enough care to model writing or accurate grammar.

Where teaching is less effective, the pace of learning is steady rather than rapid, and uneven between different groups. Reasons for this vary, and none are common. For example, in one lesson, the seating plan inhibited rather than helped learning; in another, the students' uneven progress over time was linked to their reluctance to engage with the teacher. The support of additional adults is not always maximised. This is not helped by a lack of sharpness in the personal targets set out in the

individual educational plans for disabled students and those who have special educational needs. Most teachers create a good working environment, but a few classrooms are not very conducive for learning because they are untidy, littered or poorly set out for students to see the board.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

There is a good climate for learning across the school: lessons start briskly and proceed without interruption. Students' positive attitudes are a key factor in their better progress and achievement. They feel safe and well supported, and have embraced the new 'can do' culture. Students of all ages want to succeed and they understand their own responsibility, not only for improving their own performance but also the role they can play in making the school better; the Student Leadership Team meets regularly with senior leaders to discuss improvements. The house system, based on vertical tutor groups, has introduced healthy competition, which students enjoy.

Over the two days of the monitoring inspection, behaviour observed in lessons and around the school was usually good and sometimes exemplary. Students arrive punctually to lessons, settle quickly and work steadily. Their positive attitudes are reflected in the way that they support one another, ask - as well as answer - questions, and take pride in the quality of their work.

Students themselves are rather less sanguine about whether behaviour is consistently good. Although most who spoke to inspectors were hugely positive about improvements, one said that some individuals 'behave really badly' and that behaviour in lessons taught by supply teachers is often worse. Behaviour in lessons was generally good and often outstanding, but in a few lessons observed during the visit, students did not work hard enough: incomplete or untidy work, off-task chatter and tardy responses to teachers' questions suggest that more needs to be done to secure positive attitudes. Furthermore, some indicators of positive attitudes and behaviour have shown little improvement. Attendance has increased slightly compared to last year, but the high figures for persistent absenteeism and the lower levels of attendance of those students known to be eligible for free school meals are cause for concern. Exclusions have declined, which is a positive indication of better standards of behaviour, but disabled students and those who have special educational needs are excluded disproportionately.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the school**

Since the previous monitoring inspection in October 2013, the Principal and the senior leaders seconded from the Barnfield Federation of Academies have continued to transform the school. Senior leaders, including governors, are to be commended not only for the dramatic improvements in teaching and achievement, but the way they have handled the setbacks caused by the collapse of the sponsor arrangements at the eleventh hour. Staff and students have not been distracted by the possible

difficulties created by the sponsorship failure because governors and senior leaders have worked tirelessly behind the scenes.

Monitoring of teaching is systematic, rigorous and highly effective in improving classroom practice. Outstanding teaching is openly celebrated and weaknesses are identified and addressed. The school's evaluation of teaching, based on evaluation of individual lessons, shows an improving picture. Some teachers whose teaching was judged as 'requiring improvement' have subsequently taught lessons that the school judged 'good' or 'outstanding'. This snapshot approach to assessing teaching tends to give a slightly inflated view of teaching as a whole because individual lessons do not necessarily reflect students' progress over time. Teachers who spoke to inspectors said that they feel they are supported effectively.

Notwithstanding the transformation in student achievement and the quality of teaching, aspects of leadership are not yet strong enough. Governors are knowledgeable and hard working, but the school's overly positive self-evaluation does not always give them the right information to hold leaders to account, particularly where progress is less than good.

### **External support**

The senior team seconded from the Barnfield Federation of Academies has successfully steered the school's transformation, without the need for additional external support. The local authority has provided clear guidance for governors through the uncertainties surrounding the collapse of the sponsor arrangements. The school draws on other sources of external support, as required; for example, in seeking guidance from an outstanding school to strengthen provision for special educational needs.