

Sandy Upper School

Engayne Avenue, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 1BL

Inspection dates 8–9 July 2014

Overall effectiveness	Previous inspection:	Inadequate	4
	This inspection:	Good	2
Achievement of pupils		Good	2
Quality of teaching		Good	2
Behaviour and safety of pupils		Good	2
Leadership and management		Good	2

Summary of key findings for parents and pupils

This is a good school.

- Strong and effective strategic leadership, including governance, has transformed the school since the last inspection.
- The Principal has paid minute attention to detail in steering the work of the school. This, combined with the relentless focus of senior leaders and hard work of staff and governors, provides the opportunity for every student to succeed.
- Standards are rising sharply. Students achieve well across all year groups and in most subjects, including English and mathematics.
- Teaching is usually good, and sometimes outstanding, with best practice extending more widely across a range of subjects.
- Students of all ages feel safe and behave well. They have risen to the new challenges presented to them, and their positive attitudes make a strong contribution to their learning and progress.
- The sixth form is good. Sixth-form students achieve well and are very well prepared for the next stage of their education and adult life.

It is not yet an outstanding school because

- Weaker progress in the past has left some groups with ground to make up, so their achievement is good rather than exceptional.
- The students have untapped potential, particularly in the way their views can be used to strengthen provision.
- Senior leaders recognise that some aspects of their work need to be sharpened and embedded before they have more impact. This includes promoting students' spiritual and cultural development and developing support for literacy across the curriculum.

Information about this inspection

- This two-day inspection was carried out with half a day's notice.
- Inspectors undertook observations of teaching in 16 lessons, some of which were conducted jointly with the senior leaders.
- A range of documentation was analysed, including that relating to safeguarding, students' progress, attendance, exclusions, the school's self-evaluation and its systems for managing teachers' performance and improving teaching and learning.
- Inspectors took account of the 30 responses from parents submitted to the online Parent View survey within the last 12 months. They also evaluated parental responses collated by the school.
- Discussions were held with the Principal, nominated staff, several groups of students, and three representatives from the Executive Interim Board (EIB) and one other governor.

Inspection team

Paul Brooker, Lead inspector

Her Majesty's Inspector

Samantha Stewart

Seconded Inspector

Full report

In accordance with section 13 (4) of the Education Act 2005, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector is of the opinion that the school no longer requires special measures.

Information about this school

- Sandy Upper School is smaller than the average-sized secondary school.
- Most students are White British and speak English as their first language.
- The proportion of students known to be eligible for the pupil premium (additional funding provided by the government to support students known to be eligible for free school meals and those in local authority care) is below the national average.
- The proportion of students supported through school action is above the national figure, as is the proportion supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs.
- Two students have attended alternative provision (education provided by other schools or colleges) this year. One student in Year 11 has attended Brunel Alternative Therapy for part of each week, and a Year 10 student has attended the Academy of Central Bedfordshire.
- This year, the school made early GCSE entry in November in English and mathematics for most of the Year 11 students.
- The school meets the government's current floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.
- Following the last inspection, interim leadership arrangements were put in place, including the establishment of an executive interim board (EIB). In September 2013, a new team of senior leaders from The Barnfield Federation of Academies – the prospective academy sponsor at that time - took over. In April 2014, substantive leadership appointments were made for the Principal and two Vice Principals.
- The EIB and governing body are in the process of exploring options for academy conversion.
- Since the last inspection in February 2013, which placed the school in special measures, HMI have reviewed the school's progress at regular intervals. Monitoring inspections took place in May and October 2013, and again in March 2014.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Increase the proportion of outstanding teaching so that students of all abilities achieve exceptionally well by:
 - using existing strategies to share, replicate and extend outstanding classroom practice
 - ensuring that the learning outcomes planned for each lesson and unit of work are suitably ambitious to really stretch the students
 - sharpening teachers' focus on improving students' literacy skills across the curriculum.
- Develop existing initiatives to more fully involve students by:
 - extending the opportunities for students to evaluate and strengthen the work of the school
 - taking opportunities to promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Inspection judgements

The achievement of pupils is good

- By setting ambitious target grades in all subjects and across all year groups, the aspirations of students and expectations of staff have been raised in one fell swoop. Spectacular results in the November GCSE examinations dispelled any doubts that these were too ambitious. Already, 64% of Year 11 students have secured at least a C grade in both English and mathematics. This compares with 54% in 2013, and the figure is likely to increase to 80% this summer. The number of A or A* grades already achieved in English and mathematics far exceeds the 2013 figures.
- Evidence from students' books, school assessment information and from lesson observations supports the school's view that achievement is good and set to improve further. Students from all groups and with different starting points achieve well; the proportion of students making and exceeding expected progress exceeds national figures.
- Despite improvements in 2013, standards at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form were below national figures because too many students underachieved. Since then, there has been a complete transformation. Predictions for 2014, based on rigorous assessments and results already obtained, far exceed the results achieved in 2013 at GCSE, AS and A level.
- Students achieve well in the sixth form. Success rates in 2013 were below national figures because retention rates (the number of students completing their courses) and pass rates at AS and A level were below average. This too has been transformed. Better support and guidance, combined with stronger teaching, mean that sixth-form students make good progress from their individual starting points.
- Over the course of this year, any disparities in the performance of different groups of students have been closed. This is primarily because high-quality teaching ensures that all students make the progress that they should. The first sign of any falling off in progress is immediately spotted by the school's regular and rigorous progress checks, and leaders and staff intervene to rectify the underperformance. In 2013, pupil premium students were, on average, at least a grade behind their classmates in English and almost two grades in mathematics; this gap has closed completely.
- Literacy is well supported in some lessons but, too often, teachers miss opportunities to reinforce students' skills' in speaking, reading and writing because common approaches are not widely shared and applied by all staff.
- The school makes effective use of alternative provision to support the engagement of individual students and ensure that they achieve well.

The quality of teaching is good

- Teaching has improved beyond recognition since the last inspection. Inadequate teaching has been eradicated, strengths have been consolidated, and best practice has been recognised and extended. Teaching is typically good and there is now much outstanding teaching.
- Teachers apply agreed routines to plan lessons and adopt common strategies to strengthen classroom practice. The 'no hands up' rule, for example, encourages teachers to reflect on how they pose questions and who they ask, so their questioning is more effective in checking and building students' understanding. Similarly, prescribed seating plans ensure that teachers

consider, in detail, the needs and aptitudes of each group and how these can be met.

- There is, consequently, much greater consistency in how students' learning is managed and directed, but teachers have also been encouraged to develop a range of different teaching styles. Students often say they prefer the subjects that expect them to play an active part in lessons, and this is beginning to happen more frequently as teachers more confidently try different approaches.
- Students say that teachers and learning support assistants now have much higher expectations of them, and check that they are not slipping behind. Teachers keep up to date with marking and give students clear guidance on how to improve. The recent revisions to the school's marking policy have taken this further, with students expected to respond to the 'next steps' given by their teachers.
- Teaching in the sixth form is good because teachers use their subject expertise well to plan suitably challenging work to extend and deepen students' learning.
- Students make exceptional progress when teaching is outstanding. This is most evident when teachers know, precisely, the aptitudes and potential of their students so they can plan and prepare activities that stretch and challenge them, often using a variety of resources to engage the whole group. In a Year 9 dance lesson, the work moved seamlessly from one activity to another because the teacher had, over time, nurtured the students' knowledge, understanding and skills so they could tackle very demanding and creative tasks with confidence and imagination. As a result, they worked at a furious pace.
- Although most teaching is good, and some is outstanding, teachers do not always expect enough of the students. This is sometimes reflected in tasks that are not ambitious enough, or in when planned activities lend too much time to students watching or listening to others when they could be working harder for themselves. In this respect, planned learning outcomes are sometimes not ambitious enough. Some teachers do not take enough care to model writing or accurate grammar.
- Where students' literacy is weak, teachers do not have clear strategies for developing their speaking, reading and writing skills, even when these are set out in their individual targets.

The behaviour and safety of pupils are good

- Behaviour is good, and is often exemplary. Students behave very well in class, in assembly, and around the school at break periods and between lessons. They are calm, sensible and considerate of one another when moving around the busy corridors. One notable feature of the school is the demonstrable way that students of different ages get on with one another. Students say that the house system, with mixed-age tutor groups, contributes positively to this stronger sense of community.
- The school has rightly focused on the implementation of high standards of behaviour, and students have embraced the higher aspirations. Simple, but effective strategies such as smart uniforms, seating plans and common rules have promoted not only a ubiquitously positive climate for learning but also a sense of pride, which, in turn, promotes better achievement and positive behaviour.
- Most students have positive attitudes to learning. Increasingly, they are prepared to ask questions as well as respond to the ones posed by the teacher. This greater sense of responsibility for their own learning and progress is also reflected in their willingness to review and redraft their own work, to correct errors and improve it in response to teachers' guidance. They like what they call 'the power of the purple pen'. Nonetheless, students occasionally do not

always take enough pride in the presentation of their work, and too often do not pay sufficient attention to writing accurately.

- Students are quick to recognise the improvements that have taken place. They comply with the school's higher expectations and appreciate the fact that staff 'go the extra mile' on their behalf. Increasingly, they are embracing and enjoying new responsibilities. For example, many have nominated themselves as student leaders or as house ambassadors, and lots volunteered to take an active part in the 'Making a Difference Day'.
- Despite their healthy cynicism about some of the changes made since September, students understand the benefits of working hard. Most have, for example, taken the opportunity to attend after-school clubs and additional revision sessions after school and during the holidays; around two-thirds of Year 11 students attended chemistry revision sessions over half term. However, they do not feel that their views are always sought, and say, with some justification, that the constant reiteration of rules and expectations is now unnecessary because they should be trusted to behave well.
- Attendance, which has for the last three years lagged behind national figures, has recently increased to a level that is broadly average. Procedures for monitoring and following up absence are rigorous, so that levels of persistent absence are declining. The attendance of students for whom the school receives additional funding, which was previously a concern, is now improving.
- The school's work to keep pupils safe and secure is outstanding. Staff ensure that students' safety and welfare are their key priority, and safeguarding arrangements meet all current regulatory requirements.
- Students say that they feel completely safe. When asked if there was anywhere where they could leave the school grounds without being seen, one student commented, 'Why would we want to?'
- Students know what constitutes bullying and are alert to it in all its different guises. They are well versed in the dangers and risks posed by the internet, and are confident that staff take their concerns seriously and deal with them quickly and effectively. Although there is some teasing and name-calling, students say these are not allowed to escalate and that bullying is rare.

The leadership and management are good

- The Principal and senior team have transformed the school by focusing tirelessly on raising standards. In doing so, they have left nothing to chance, particularly in regard to establishing good behaviour, strengthening teaching and securing better achievement. The Principal has used her forensic analysis to carefully direct the work of others, and ensured that everything is underpinned by setting ambitious individual targets and through the systematic assessment and review of students' progress.
- The micro-management by senior leaders has secured rapid improvement, and highlighted aspects of subject and other leadership that needed strengthening. During the course of this year, the influence and effectiveness of subject and other leaders have been quickly strengthened, with transparent accountability for subject leaders and heads of house. However, some of these posts are new and leaders have not had time to impact fully on securing the best outcomes for students. Leadership of the sixth form is good.
- Strategies for improving teaching have been highly effective because they have combined rigorous performance management, based on student progress data, with high-quality professional development to improve the practice of all staff. Monitoring of teaching is systematic, rigorous and highly effective in improving classroom practice. Outstanding teaching

is openly celebrated and ideas are routinely shared because leaders recognise that more opportunities to share very best practice will help to further improve teaching. Weaknesses in teaching are identified and addressed through a carefully tailored programme of support and guidance, combining external training and one-to-one support within school.

- Staff at all levels have worked very effectively to meet the Principal's relentless and uncompromising expectations. They have welcomed additional support to strengthen their classroom practice, such as one-to-one guidance from teaching and learning leaders. The upshot is that the school has become a 'learning community', wherein students and adults routinely talk about 'progress' and 'levels', and teachers exchange ideas about 'effective teaching'.
- The restructuring of pastoral responsibilities into a house system has sharpened the focus of support for individual students, so that anyone who is struggling with attendance or academic progress is immediately picked up.
- The school's curriculum has been sensibly adapted to enable students to access a wide range of different qualifications and achieve well, whatever their starting point. Breadth and balance are achieved by offering additional options in Year 11 once students have gained good qualifications in Year 10, and by offering a wide range of subjects for sixth-form students. The revisions provide opportunities for academic, technical and sporting excellence, but not enough account is taken of the need to promote students' spiritual, moral, social development in the school's day-to-day work.
- The local authority has offered and provided good support and guidance since the last inspection. The executive interim board, chaired by a local authority officer, has skilfully steered the work of the governing body.
- **The governance of the school:**
 - Governors are well informed, hard working and effective. They know about the performance management of staff and have established that pay rises for teachers should be dependent on their students making good progress. Governors are aware of the impact of key elements of expenditure, including the pupil premium funding, and they ensure that robust procedures are in place to safeguard students. When the school first started to improve rapidly, they were too pleased to then be able find fault with the school's highly effective leadership team. In recent months, however, governors have developed their role as 'critical friends', and have provided suitable challenge to balance their good support. Governors are confident in asking probing questions and making strategic decisions for themselves.

What inspection judgements mean

School		
Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	An outstanding school is highly effective in delivering outcomes that provide exceptionally well for all its pupils' needs. This ensures that pupils are very well equipped for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 2	Good	A good school is effective in delivering outcomes that provide well for all its pupils' needs. Pupils are well prepared for the next stage of their education, training or employment.
Grade 3	Requires improvement	A school that requires improvement is not yet a good school, but it is not inadequate. This school will receive a full inspection within 24 months from the date of this inspection.
Grade 4	Inadequate	<p>A school that has serious weaknesses is inadequate overall and requires significant improvement but leadership and management are judged to be Grade 3 or better. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p> <p>A school that requires special measures is one where the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the school's leaders, managers or governors have not demonstrated that they have the capacity to secure the necessary improvement in the school. This school will receive regular monitoring by Ofsted inspectors.</p>

School details

Unique reference number	109669
Local authority	Central Bedfordshire
Inspection number	447137

This inspection was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was also deemed a section 5 inspection under the same Act.

Type of school	Secondary
School category	Maintained
Age range of pupils	13–18
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Gender of pupils in the sixth form	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	599
Of which, number on roll in sixth form	129
Appropriate authority	The local authority
Chair	Alison Kitchener and Tracy Stock
Principal	Balraj Hare
Date of previous school inspection	14 February 2013
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