

4 January 2007

Mr S Peacey  
Head teacher  
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Dear Mr Peacey

## SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF MARK RUTHERFORD UPPER SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

### Introduction

Following my visit with Jennifer Hall, Richard Merryfield and Ann Taylor, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 6 and 7 December 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the second monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in February 2006.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

### Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, nominated staff, groups of students, the chair of governors and a representative from the local authority (LA).

### Context

The leadership of the school has changed considerably since July 2006. In September, after the resignation of the headteacher, two headteachers, one recently retired and one from a local middle school, agreed to become joint acting headteachers until a permanent replacement could be found. Quite soon into the term, the retired headteacher was no longer able to carry out his role and the headteacher from the middle school has taken over as interim headteacher whilst still overseeing his own school. The governing body has taken the decision to interview for a permanent headteacher in

February to secure an appointment as soon as possible. The school has also been linked to a Leading Edge school in Cambridgeshire and a deputy headteacher from there has been seconded into the school. There is a new assistant headteacher (inclusion), a new chair of governors and new LA and parent governors. Seventeen members of staff left at the end of the summer term. They have been replaced mainly by a mixture of qualified staff, some overseas trained staff and unqualified teachers, some on short-term contracts. The recruitment of qualified, experienced teachers continues to be a challenge.

## Achievement and standards

Standards across the school are starting to show improvement. Since the last visit students have achieved higher test and examination results. In the 2006 national tests for Year 9, students achieved higher standards in English, mathematics and science than in the previous year. Students currently in Year 9 are making satisfactory progress towards meeting challenging targets because the quality of teaching has improved. Results in the 2006 tests exceeded targets in mathematics, but did not meet them in English and science. Systems for recording the achievements of students in Year 9 have improved since the last visit. As a result, heads of department are now better able to identify early signs of underachievement and devise programmes to support these students.

Two years ago, the curriculum at Key Stage 4 was changed to provide a better match of courses to the interests and abilities of students. The impact of these changes was most marked in 2006 in the improved performance of boys who for the first time matched the performance of girls in GCSE examinations. Since the last visit the percentage of students achieving five A\* to C GCSE grades has improved from 43% to 50%. Nevertheless, this result falls short of the national average, and short of the target for the school of 55%. This target remains a significant challenge for the current Year 11 students, because the very recent improvements in teaching, for example, will take time to raise standards. There has been no improvement in the proportion of students gaining GCSE grades A\* to C in English language, mathematics and double science. This is because there was insufficient support, last year, for underachieving Year 11 students who in Year 9 had shown the potential to gain at least GCSE grade C in Year 11, but failed to do so. Current achievement, observed on this visit, is mixed. Higher ability groups frequently make good progress because students are generally taught well and they have positive attitudes to learning. The progress of lower ability groups is more mixed because of weaknesses in teaching, and poor behaviour by a small group of students.

Standards in the sixth form are improving and students are making satisfactory progress. Almost all students passed their Advanced Level examinations in 2006. In 13 of 21 subjects, the percentage of students achieving higher GCE grades A and B improved.

### Judgement

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2006:

- Increase the students' achievement and raise standards by improving the quality of education provided – satisfactory progress.

### Personal development and well-being

The whole-school effort to raise students' attendance is now making much more of a difference since the last monitoring visit. Current attendance rates, running at 92%, are in line with the national average. When compared to the rate in February, this reveals an impressive 4% increase. It confirms strategies to support and encourage regular attendance are hitting home. Rigorous monitoring of the attendance action plan by senior leaders, a growing awareness of the importance of monitoring form tutor's work, productive links with support agencies and an increased awareness of the impact of various initiatives on attendance (such as the work of the Study Plus group) are all contributory factors.

Lateness to school is currently an issue for a minority of students. This has been recognised because staff now have higher expectations of what is, and is not, acceptable. They recognise current sanctions are not working as well as they should. Ideas to help potentially vulnerable students, such as breakfast clubs, are being devised, in order to improve timekeeping in the mornings.

Students' behaviour remains satisfactory overall and part of an improving picture. Students speak positively about the way behaviour is improving and recognise it is much better than it was last term. They correctly attribute this to a stricter regime, improved systems and a more consistent approach from staff. The behaviour policy has just been re-launched, coupled with some very recent initiatives to support those with challenging behaviour. Naturally, these are still bedding in and have not had time to make an impact. The house system 'is starting to kick in' as students put it, and is building a greater sense of community and belonging.

Progress in the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2006:

Improve the students' rate of attendance- good progress.

### Quality of provision

The quality of teaching is continuing to improve but is not yet sufficiently consistent to be judged good. Progress is evident in the improved quality of Year 9 lessons, a weakness at the last visit, and the reduced proportion of inadequate teaching.

The school has an accurate appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses in teaching and is taking effective action to address underperforming subjects and teachers, although the high turnover of staff and recruitment issues make this difficult. The school uses evidence from lesson observations to target the continuing professional development programme. In the core subjects, coaches have been appointed to work with colleagues to raise standards. Inspectors' judgements largely matched the school's observations, although there is scope for a clearer focus on learning rather than teaching, in the latter.

In several lessons teachers talk too much and students become passive onlookers, or on some occasions misbehave, so that independence in learning is undermined and progress is only satisfactory or worse. Students report that behaviour sometimes deteriorates because some teachers are not strict enough and some overseas trained teachers are difficult to understand.

Central systems for setting targets and monitoring progress are developing well, although not all teachers are sufficiently confident or clear in translating these into concrete guidance for students on what they need to do to improve. This weakness is compounded by continuing inconsistency in the marking of books so that students' progress is not always supported by effective feedback.

### Judgement

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection since the last monitoring visit in July 2006:

- Raise the quality and consistency of teaching to ensure all students are engaged in learning - satisfactory progress.

## Leadership and management

The acting headteacher has gathered a strong leadership team around him in a short period of time, and leadership is more rigorous and focused. As one Year 11 student put it “there is now more authority in the school and the teachers are more in charge”. This increased rigour can be seen in the fact that of the seventeen teachers who joined the school in September, five have subsequently been asked to leave, because their teaching skills were inadequate. The school has a good system of ensuring its fluctuating and changing staff are checked and approved before they start work. Systems are rigorous and efficiently administered. Child protection procedures have been overhauled and improved to ensure students are safe. A large financial deficit, not mentioned at the previous visit, is being effectively managed with the support of the LA.

The new chair of Governors has a clear vision for the school, and a good grasp of the school’s strengths and weaknesses. The governing body has been revitalised by new parent and LA governors and new structures. It is becoming more strategic and is beginning to hold the school to account.

Progress is beginning to be made in developing the strategic leadership of heads of department and pastoral heads. Examination results have been critically analysed to identify underperforming departments. The Working in Schools Extensively (WISE) project, whereby LA consultants come into the school and work in a coordinated way with selected members of staff, has led to the production of specific, on-going raising achievement plans for each department. However, not all heads of department are fully signed up to this process and a few are still reluctant to take full responsibility for the performance of their area. Data is now analysed to monitor the progress of different groups of students, for example, those with learning difficulties and disabilities. The school has not yet used the new system, however, to monitor the progress of minority ethnic groups.

The completion of a formal school self-evaluation (SEF) has been postponed but departments are completing their own evaluations which will feed into the whole-school document. An evaluation of progress has been completed but this is a rather descriptive list of actions taken and is light on explanation or evaluation of impact and outcomes. However, the headteacher has an accurate grasp of what has still to be done in the school with regard to raising standards, improving the quality of teaching and the motivation and behaviour of students. The approach is starting to be more self evaluative; so much so that a complete overhaul of the special needs department has been identified as a priority. Support seen for pupils with special educational needs

during the last visit was satisfactory but inspectors did not see the full picture due to the timing of the visit. Current evidence concurs with the school's view

that support in class is not well managed or targeted in order to help learning.

The process of improvement planning is being reviewed and so the school is still using a revised post-Ofsted action plan as a basis for improvement. The present leadership has identified appropriate priorities for future development such as becoming a high performing school and gaining specialist college status. The leadership team has sufficient dynamism to eventually bring about good improvement at the school. However, it is still early days and the impact of their work needs further time to develop consistency across departments.

### Judgement

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in February 2006:

- Increase the rigour of leadership and management by more timely and focused improvement planning, and more effective quality assurance monitoring and evaluation of departments–satisfactory progress.

### External Support

Local authority consultant support has been well co-ordinated and of good quality. It has had a positive impact.

### Main Judgements

Progress since being subject to special measures– satisfactory

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – good

Up to three newly qualified teachers may be appointed subject to the approval of the monitoring HMI.

### Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards in core subjects at Key Stage 4 by using data more effectively for early identification of underachievement.
- Improve behaviour in lessons by eliminating weak teaching.

- Improve the strategic leadership of heads of departments, heads of year and special educational needs.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Director of Children's Services for Bedfordshire.

Yours sincerely

*Margaret Jones*

H M Inspector