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26 September 2008

Ms Angela Wells  
The Headteacher  
Buckingham School  
London Road  
Buckingham  
MK18 1AT

Dear Ms Wells

Special measures: monitoring inspection of Buckingham School

Following my visit with Isobel Randall, Alan Brewerton and John Laver, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 17 and 18 September 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2008. The monitoring inspection report is attached and the main judgements are set out below.

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate

Newly qualified teachers may be appointed provided the acting headteacher judges that the department has the capacity to provide suitable support and mentoring.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

I am copying this letter and the monitoring inspection report to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Divisional Manager, School Improvement for Buckinghamshire.

Yours sincerely

Ann Berger  
Additional Inspector

## Special measures: monitoring of Buckingham School

Report from the first monitoring inspection on 17 and 18 September 2008

### Evidence

Inspectors observed the school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting headteacher, consultant headteacher, groups of pupils, the vice-chair of governors, two representatives from the local authority (LA), heads of department, teachers and members of the senior leadership team.

### Context

The Buckingham School has had unsettled leadership in recent times. The substantive headteacher left in Spring 2008 and the interim headteacher, from another local school, had to return to his school after one term. The governors have appointed, with support from the LA, an acting headteacher for one year and a consultant headteacher who is working for 3 days per week in the school. This new leadership team has been in place for two weeks.

### Achievement and standards

Provisional test results for 2008 indicate a slight fall in Year 9 in English and science. In mathematics, standards were similar at Level 5 and standards of higher-attaining students improved, although the targets agreed with the LA were not met. Much better results were achieved for pupils at the end of Year 11. The proportion of students gaining five or more passes at GCSE rose from 32% in 2007 to 45% in 2008. Those gaining five GCSE grades, including English and mathematics, rose from 25% to 35% in 2008. Though this was a significant improvement, it was from an exceptionally low base and, as with Key Stage 3, the targets were not met. The senior team attributed these reported gains to the coaching and mentoring of individual students in Year 11. They recognise that there remain too many students who did not reach their full potential.

Though satisfactory progress has been made in this area, overall achievement and standards remain inadequate. In the lessons observed students' progress was inadequate on too many occasions because of low expectations. For example, Year 7 students were often repeating work undertaken early in their primary school years and work in many classes was not sufficiently challenging to stretch the most able.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Raise standards and achievement for all students, especially in Years 10 and 11 – satisfactory

## Personal development and well-being

Behaviour in the school is much improved and there were no instances of disruption or difficult behaviour observed. However, the pupils are not as actively involved in the life of the school as they should be and they lack a sense of ownership and loyalty. Students do not feel that they can influence the direction of the school. Though they recognise the existence of the school council, few can recall examples of its impact. Some isolated initiatives are in place, for example where trained volunteers contribute their views to staff appointments, but there is little evidence of any strategic direction to this work and opportunities are being missed to galvanise the student force to improve the school.

## Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is inconsistent. Too much is inadequate and too little is good. The main weakness in teaching lies in the low expectations evident in many classes. Work that has already been understood is repeated, the objectives set do not include challenge for the more able students, and work is not marked well enough to be sure that pupils know what they need to do to improve.

There has been training to improve teaching and raise expectations but the impact of this has varied considerably within departments and across subjects. There are also gaps in some teachers' subject knowledge due to poor deployment decisions in some instances.

The school has tried to work on establishing systems to set challenging targets for pupils but the low expectations embedded in the culture of the school has meant many of these targets lack sufficient challenge. The weak marking systems and feedback to pupils also means the students are not sure how they will achieve the targets set.

The provision for pupils with special education needs is limited. Despite the significant number of pupils with statements for specific learning difficulties there are no specialist teachers of special educational needs in the school. The provision relies too heavily on computerised materials rather than quality teaching.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve teaching and learning by ensuring that all teachers assess students' work more precisely and show them how to improve – inadequate
- Make sure that all students get the support and advice they need to reach challenging targets – inadequate

## Leadership and management

There is currently no school development plan or any clear written document that sets out what the school intends to do to address the weaknesses. Governors have not shown the capacity to challenge the school effectively and their systems are not sufficiently robust to hold the headteacher and senior team to account. At the start of the term there was no up to date evaluation of the work undertaken last term to form a basis for the new leadership team to begin their work. The new acting headteacher and consultant have nevertheless worked swiftly to pull together a brief self evaluation which aligns well with the judgements made by inspectors on this visit. They have already shown a very good understanding of what needs to be done and this bodes well for the future. They have put into place weekly meetings with the senior team to begin to hold the team to account for their work and improve the drive and direction of the senior leadership team though it is too early to judge the impact of this.

Though most of the senior leaders are diligent, they lack strategic direction. They take individual actions but these do not relate to an overview of how things are to be improved. The line management arrangements ensure that middle leaders report regularly to the senior team but this information is not sufficiently well used to secure the improvements necessary.

A significant weakness is the management and organisation of the school. The timetable is poor and human resources are wasted. Too many classes are shared, disrupting the continuity of learning and staff are too often deployed outside their specialism. Insufficient analysis was undertaken last term to ensure the school employed the correct staffing this year. Despite this, the school has appointed a larger number of teachers with suitable qualifications and the school was fully staffed from the start of term. The judgements relating to the quality of teaching, however, throw some doubt on the effectiveness of the decision-making processes in this area.

Despite all these weaknesses, staff report that the expectations of the newly appointed acting headteacher have become clear and precise and morale is improving, even in such a short time.

The school has sports college status and this provision is an oasis of good practice. Nevertheless, it is not fully permeating the life of the school and remains a considerable untapped potential in establishing a vibrant and distinct ethos.

Progress since the last visit on the areas for improvement:

- Improve leadership and management so that plans for improvement are implemented quickly and effectively and evaluated more rigorously – inadequate
- Make further efforts to recruit and retain more teachers – inadequate

## External support

The LA statement of action meets the requirements. However, it is no longer suitable for the new circumstances and is due to be reviewed shortly and, thereafter, termly. The LA has also confirmed that its own view of the school's progress was over-reliant on the somewhat optimistic views of the school. Nevertheless, they have acted effectively to recruit a new headteacher and consultant with extensive experience and expertise who are now well placed to swiftly improve the school.

Consultancy support for subject leaders has been commissioned by the LA and individual teachers report that this has been broadly useful. However, there is little structured evaluation of the impact of this work. In the least effective departments insufficient support has been directed at ensuring the leadership of the subject improves.

Despite the positive work done by the LA, action has not been sufficiently rapid. In addition, action to ensure governance is improved has been ineffective.

Even though positive steps are being taken to improve the school, progress has not been as fast as it should be given the circumstances and the support of the LA is inadequate overall.

## Priorities for further improvement

- Find ways of ensuring that the students' views help to drive the school's improvement agenda.