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Karen Hayward
Principal
Sandy Upper School
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Dear Mrs Hayward

Short inspection of Sandy Upper School

Following my visit to the school on 6 December 2017 with Vivien Corrie-Wing, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in July 2014.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has maintained the good quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Following this inspection, the school went through a period of instability. However, your calm, determined and decisive leadership has brought about the stability required to improve standards further. You are ably supported by a strong leadership team.

Staff enjoy working at the school and are very complementary about the quality of support senior leaders provide. Members of staff working at the school during the previous inspection say the school has improved since then.

Leaders, including governors, have high aspirations for pupils and this is shared by staff. You have worked with staff to improve their teaching and this is now typically good. Pupils have positive attitudes towards their learning and, as a result, they behave well in lessons and around the school. Pupils take pride in their work, school and appearance. One parent commented on how smart pupils look in their uniform on their way to and from school.

You have taken action to improve the curriculum so that all but a very small minority of pupils have access to the English Baccalaureate subjects. Pupils are no longer taking subjects that do not count towards the end of Year 11 national progress and attainment scores. This was not the case in the curriculum pupils followed before and, up until this year, has had a negative impact on achievement in some key subjects such as science and English.

You have successfully addressed areas for improvement from the previous inspection. Good practice in teaching is now shared, as recommended in the previous inspection report, across the school as part of individualised training programmes. Evidence from visits to lessons and work in pupils' books indicates teachers are providing appropriately challenging work for pupils. The previous inspection report also asked school leaders to improve pupils' literacy skills. As a result, you have made literacy a focus across all subjects. Weekly reading sessions where staff and students 'drop everything and read' are well established. Pupils learn key subject vocabulary and spellings and are expected to use them correctly. However, you acknowledge that this remains one of the school's key priorities.

Governance is very strong. Governors are very realistic about the strengths and weaknesses within the school. They are relentless in their monitoring. Governors effectively challenge all leaders about the impact of their work on improving school standards. The governors have a clear sense of direction for the school and together you work well with the local authority to make sure the school is included in local improvement initiatives. Plans for the school to become an 11 to 18 secondary school in September 2018 are well under way.

Safeguarding is effective.

All staff are appropriately trained in the latest safeguarding practices and they are aware of the procedures to follow should they have a concern about any pupil. There is good supervision of pupils at break and lunchtime to ensure their safety. All the appropriate pre-employment checks are carried out on staff and volunteers before they can work with pupils. Procedures for following up unexplained pupil absences are thorough to ensure that no pupil is at risk of not being educated. Pupils say they feel safe in school and parents agree.

Work with outside agencies is strong. Staff keep meticulous records of contact they may have with any agency involved with a pupil. These records are kept secure and leaders ensure that agreed actions are followed up. Some members of the safeguarding team are members of local authority safeguarding committees, for example the pupil voice sub-committee of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Inspection findings

- Achievement in English was an area of focus for this inspection because progress and attainment at the end of key stage 4 fell to below average in 2017. Prior to last year achievement was above average. A major factor for this decline was the change in examination. Pupils had started to prepare for the older-style GCSE in Year 9 and took this examination at the end of Year 10. As a result, they had a year to prepare for the new-style examination. Leaders have used the results from last year well to identify changes that need to be made in teaching. This has been effective on improving standards in English.
- The current achievement information illustrates that most pupils are making at least good progress in English, with disadvantaged pupils making rapid progress. The work in pupils' books shows that teachers have high expectations of pupils

and they set work that is appropriate to the needs of the pupils. Pupils take pride in their work and act upon the advice given to further improve their work. As a result, pupils in all year groups are making strong progress in English.

- Another line of enquiry looked at the actions leaders have taken to improve outcomes for pupils in science and humanities. This was chosen as a focus because progress in these subjects has historically been below average. This underachievement has been partly caused because many pupils were following vocational science qualifications and partly because of difficulty in recruiting science and humanities staff.
- Both departments are now fully staffed and staff are familiar with the requirements of the new GCSE examinations. Subject leaders provide decisive leadership and have started to successfully improve outcomes for pupils at the end of key stage 4. In 2017 the results in both science and geography improved on those of previous years.
- The work in pupils' humanities books indicates that teachers have high expectations and pupils are taught to apply subject-specific knowledge and skills. As a result, most groups of pupils are prepared for the more challenging style of examination. However, the literacy skills of lower-ability pupils are not strong enough to enable them to extend their written work.
- Observations of learning in science indicate that pupils are positive about their learning, most make the necessary improvements to their work and teachers use questioning well to check pupils' understanding. Teachers focus well on key science vocabulary. As a result, pupils are more confident in using key terms in their oral and written answers. However, pupils are not being prepared adequately to write extensively in science. This holds back their achievement.
- During this inspection, inspectors focused on the achievement of sixth-form students studying academic qualifications. This was an area of enquiry because published results indicate that achievement of pupils in A-level subjects has been well below average whereas achievement in vocational subjects is consistently above average.
- Unvalidated A-level results for 2017 indicate an overall improvement on the proportion of pupils attaining a pass and the higher A* to B grades in academic subjects. This is a result of effective monitoring of provision by the head of sixth form and senior leaders. You ensure that students who wish to study A level have the higher grades in the subjects they have chosen and are provided with appropriate careers advice. Therefore, pupils are placed on the right courses for them. We agreed that there is a need to further develop leadership across the sixth form so senior leaders are not the main driving force in securing further improvements.
- Observations of learning in the sixth form indicate good teaching in academic subjects as teachers provide students with suitably challenging work and the opportunity to develop the skills they require when they leave school, for example independent research and discussion skills.
- At the time of the previous inspection, leaders were asked to extend the opportunities pupils have to participate in school improvement and to promote

pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Inspection findings were that work in pupils' books showed a range of learning opportunities to develop these areas. For example, during our learning observations inspectors saw some good examples of pupils debating topics such as forgiveness and whether thermal energy will have a positive or negative impact on the environment. In addition to studying the English Baccalaureate pupils have the opportunity to study artistic and technological subjects and sport.

- There are a variety of opportunities for pupils to become involved in the life of the school. I met with a group of pupils who hold leadership responsibilities. Pupils were able to explain how they represent the views of pupils and some of their suggestions that have been adopted by leaders, for example awarding commendation badges. The head boy and head girl represent the views of the students on the governing board. These students and most of those inspectors talked to said they felt their views were listened to. One pupil commented: 'Listening to us is not just about the big things. It's when you tell a teacher their teaching style is not helping you learn and they change it that matters.'

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- attainment in science continues to improve by teachers developing pupils' extended writing skills
- literacy skills in humanities are further developed so that pupils, especially lower-ability pupils, are able to write in depth
- they continue to develop leadership in the sixth form.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Central Bedfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Caroline Pardy
Ofsted Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this inspection, we held meetings with you, two members of the governing body, members of the senior leadership team and the heads of English, science and the sixth form. We also met with pupils from the school council, prefects and the head boy and head girl and spoke with other pupils during break and lunchtime. We examined a number of documents including the school's development plan, leaders' evaluation of the school's performance, documents relating to safeguarding and attendance and minutes of governors' meetings. We also visited a number of

lessons to look at learning in science, humanities, English and the sixth form and looked at pupils' work in these subjects.

We took account of Ofsted's online questionnaires from 36 pupils, 41 members of staff and 51 parents, including 27 free-text responses from parents.