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27 April 2012

Mrs Sue Croft  
The Principal  
Oxford Spires Academy  
Glanville Road  
Oxford  
OX4 2AU

Dear Mrs Croft

## **Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Oxford Spires Academy**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with Joanna Beckford-Hall, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 25 and 26 April 2012, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection was the first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, groups of staff, a group of parents, students and the Chair and vice-chair of the Governing Body.

### **Context**

This academy serves a diverse community in East Oxford and opened in January 2011, replacing the Oxford School. There are 799 students on roll, 209 of whom attend the sixth form. An above-average proportion of students come from minority ethnic backgrounds. About half the students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of disabled students and those who have special educational needs is approximately one quarter of those on roll. The proportion of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals is above average. The academy has dual specialist status in English and business. Most staff transferred

from the predecessor school. Some new appointments have been made to strengthen subject leadership and management roles.

### **Achievement of pupils at the academy**

Students enter the academy with attainment that is well below average. The overall attainment of Year 11 students leaving in 2011 was low. Although the academy met the government's current floor standards (the minimum expectations for students' attainment and progress), a below-average proportion of students gained five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE. The proportion of students making expected progress was higher-than-average in mathematics but below average in English. Forty one per cent of students gained five or more A\* to C grades including English and mathematics, a 10% improvement from the predecessor school. Students who speak English as an additional language made above-average progress.

The improvements in GCSE examinations, soon after the academy opened, reflect the robust action, appropriate interventions and raised expectations from senior leaders and staff to improve teaching and learning. This culture of high expectations has continued to have a positive impact on students' progress. The academy's monitoring shows students are on track to do better again this year. Students' experiences in the classroom are more positive and in the better lessons students are working hard, making good progress, developing good learning skills and enjoying their work.

There is a legacy of low attainment to overcome and some underachievement remains across the academy. Where teaching is not consistently good, the progress of students is not yet accelerating fast enough for them to achieve their very best.

Students' performance in the sixth form was low in 2011. Senior leaders and staff quickly responded by putting in place more rigorous procedures to monitor progress and support students. Early indications from the academy's checking of students' progress show that performance is improving and results will be substantially better this year. In sixth form lessons, students have excellent attitudes, apply themselves well to learning and are committed to reaching their target grades to enable them to access their own high aspirations for the future.

The academy has put a strong emphasis on developing students' oracy skills which is evident in those lessons where students can engage in class and group discussions and answer questions. The quality and amount of students' written work in their workbooks and the quality of teachers' marking of their efforts are extremely variable.

### **The quality of teaching**

The majority of teaching observed by inspectors was good. During discussions with inspectors students commented positively on improvements in teaching since the academy started. A group of parents also expressed their strong satisfaction with

teaching and the progress their children are making. Students' responses to the best teaching are striking. Provided with interesting and challenging tasks which build effectively on previous learning, as in the best lessons, students willingly answer probing questions, work hard and show a good deal of respect for each other and their teachers, successfully reflecting the key aspirations of the academy.

There is some satisfactory and a very small amount of inadequate teaching. In some lessons not enough attention is given to ensuring that tasks are well matched to the needs of all students, despite the assessment information available from the academy's rigorous monitoring of progress. Tasks are not always thought through well enough to ensure that the potential and opportunities for learning can be accessed by all students. This means that sometimes pupils who are more at risk of falling behind are not suitably engaged in lessons, leading to lower achievement. Not all teachers follow the academy's policy of regular marking.

The provision for students who speak English as an additional language is good. There are some of these students who are making good and sometimes outstanding progress. Disabled students and those who have special educational needs have equally good specialist support. However the day-to-day impact of the provision in all classes for students who require additional support to prevent them from falling behind is not yet consistent. New systems for helping teachers plan and teach alongside teaching assistants are increasingly well organised but not yet accelerating the progress of these students in every lesson.

The opportunities afforded to students to discuss ideas, answer questions and work together in lessons and during extra-curricular activities effectively support the development of their social skills and self-confidence.

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

Behaviour is improving. Students and parents spoke very positively about this aspect of improvement since the academy started. The number of exclusions has been substantially reduced. This has a very positive impact on learning. Students and parents believe the academy is a safe environment. Students feel free from bullying, racism and intimidation. Parents and students believe that any occurrences of such behaviour are dealt with effectively when they occur. Parents of students who have recently enrolled at the academy were pleased at how well their children were able to integrate and settle to their learning.

Students, parents and staff are extremely positive about the house system. It has proved a strong vehicle to promote a sense of community and respect between students. It provides a sense of belonging; gives students additional roles and responsibilities; and successfully extends opportunities for extra-curricular activities and competitions. During the inspection, students took part in an inter-house public speaking competition, an event well supported by students, staff, parents and governors.

Attendance is above average. There are robust and effective procedures for monitoring and improving attendance. Persistent absence has reduced. This has made a positive contribution to learning.

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

The Principal has provided strong and clear leadership. Working alongside staff, students and parents, she has successfully steered the academy to establish an environment which has raised self-belief, engendered aspiration and improved performance at individual and whole-academy levels. Senior leaders work well as a team, with common purpose. Middle leaders feel valued and are motivated to develop their roles and drive improvements at departmental level. There is a clear focus on raising standards and a strong capacity to improve. Even after a short time, senior leaders have not been afraid to change plans and make adjustments to practice if that is what is needed to secure improvement.

Senior leaders have a good overall awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the academy and have set appropriate targets. While senior leaders' discussions and joint observations with inspectors show leaders have a clear and accurate view of what constitutes effective teaching, the academy's previously recorded evaluations of teaching were more generous than those of the inspectors. Successful steps have been taken to improve the overall quality of teaching, although some weaknesses remain. Senior leaders are aware of the importance of developing a thorough understanding of robust monitoring of teaching by leaders at all levels.

The governing body is very well organised and highly expert. It provides a good level of challenge to school leaders and ensures that progress towards improvement-plan targets is regularly monitored and evaluated. Community links are developing effectively from the point of view of the perceptions of the academy within its immediate community and also in the external links that support the development of learning opportunities for students.

Arrangements for safeguarding students meet requirements.

### **External support**

The main sponsors provide good quality and expert support, not only about educational matters but also about a range of technical and administrative functions required to enable the academy to function efficiently. A substantial government-funded new building programme is planned.

### **Main judgements**

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

## **Priorities for further improvement**

- Accelerate students' progress by ensuring that all teachers are equally adept at:
  - tackling gaps in learning by making even better use of assessment information to plan and match tasks to meet the needs of different groups of students
  - thinking through carefully how the learning potential of tasks and activities can be fully realised for all students in every lesson.
  
- Develop processes for senior and middle leaders to work more closely together to monitor and raise the quality of all teaching.
  
- Raise and more carefully monitor the quality of students' written responses across all subjects.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Daniel Towl  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**