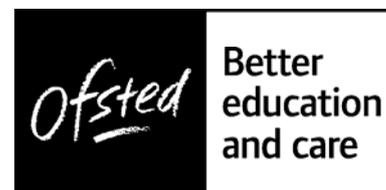


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Mr R Slade
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Dear Mr Slade

Academies Initiative: Inspection Visit to The Primary Section, The Business Academy Bexley

Thank you for your hospitality during my visit to your school with Mrs L McGill HMI and Mrs D Holdaway HMI on 25 and 26 April 2005. This letter is to confirm the findings, which are recorded below.

This inspection visit was arranged in connection with the academies initiative. The focus was the pupils' attainment and the factors affecting it; the effectiveness and impact of the actions which you are already taking to raise the pupils' attainment; and the implementation of plans for the development of the academy.

During the visit, we inspected 20 lessons, two assemblies and three registration sessions. The pupils were observed at break and lunch times and samples of their work were examined. Meetings were held with the acting principal, the deputy executive principal and an assistant principal and other nominated staff. Informal discussions were held with other staff and pupils. A range of the academy's documentation was scrutinised.

The Primary Section opened in September 2004, following the closures of Abbey Primary, which was removed from special measures in 2003, and Southlake Primary, which was removed from serious weaknesses in 2001. The Primary Section is housed in a new building close to the secondary building. There are 417 pupils on roll, including 29 who have formal Statements of Special Educational Needs, a proportion which is very high. All together, 29 per cent of the pupils are identified as having some degree of special educational need. Most pupils are of white British heritage but a very wide range of other ethnicities is represented, the main one of which is African. A little under 20 per cent of the pupils speak English

as an additional language. Forty two per cent of the pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is well above average and indicative of the disadvantaged area served by the academy. Most of the auxiliary staff but few of the teachers from the predecessor schools transferred to the academy. The principal, an assistant principal and two teachers have left The Primary Section since it opened. There are three newly qualified teachers and two teachers on supply contracts. A neighbourhood nursery uses part of the building but is not managed by the academy. However, its status has only recently been clarified.

Standards of attainment are below average overall but improving well at Key Stage 2, particularly in Year 6. In 2004, the results of the national tests taken by pupils in Year 6 at the predecessor schools were low, particularly in mathematics. Standardised assessments of literacy and numeracy carried out when The Primary Section opened indicate that there is a wide range of attainment but that the profile is skewed downwards, with around half of each year group registering as below average and only a small proportion as above average. Nevertheless, for the 2005 national tests, the academy has set extremely challenging targets for the percentage of pupils it wishes to see attaining Level 4 or better: 75 per cent in English, 67 per cent in mathematics and 63 per cent in science. The figures for English and mathematics exceed the most ambitious targets drawn from the Fischer Family Trust data.

Observations in lessons confirm the upward trend at Key Stage 2, where, generally, the pupils are making good progress although it ranges from very good to unsatisfactory. In over half of the lessons in this part of the academy, the pupils were working at levels in line with those expected nationally. There were several notable features in the pupils' work. Writing across a wide range of genres showed a growing maturity of expression and, in Year 6, a confident use of powerful imagery. Calculations in mathematics were being carried out with increasing accuracy and, in science, the pupils confidently voiced hypotheses and used a range of graphs to record their observations. Beyond the core subjects, work in information and communication technology (ICT), art, history and music showed how the pupils were able to achieve appropriate, or sometimes higher, standards for their age when taught well.

In contrast, at Key Stage 1 and in the reception classes, most of the pupils' work was well below the standards expected; it was only in Year 1 that attainment began to approach a suitable level. Many of the pupils in the reception year were unable to write their name or to count securely past three. In Year 2, the pupils' writing was poor in quality, quantity and range, and their numerical skills, for instance knowing doubles of numbers, were scarcely better than those of many pupils in Year 1. The academy has not set any targets for the end-of-Key Stage 1 tests, nor was any data available from the predecessor schools to gauge potential improvement, which is unhelpful. However, the evidence from lessons is clear: the pupils are making insufficient progress in reception and Year 2, and, therefore, across this age range as a whole.

At all key stages, the legacy of underachievement in the past sometimes showed itself in gaps in the pupils' knowledge which hindered their progress. Many of the pupils lack confidence in their abilities and, consequently, did not gain the maximum from the learning opportunities presented, even when they were of an outstanding quality. In all year groups, a significant number of pupils lack self-motivation and self-belief, limiting their engagement with learning despite the best efforts of the teachers and assistants. Nevertheless, this did not result in misbehaviour. In just over half of the lessons, the pupils' attitudes and behaviour were good or very good, and were unsatisfactory in only one lesson, which was at Key Stage 1.

Most of the pupils co-operated willingly with each other and their teachers. They adjusted quickly from one activity to another, maintained high levels of concentration even when not directly supervised by adults, and continued their work in spite of distracting noise caused by the open-plan arrangement of classrooms. Behaviour around the school was good. The pupils are polite, friendly and courteous to visitors. The playgrounds are well supervised and the pupils report that they feel safe and know what to do if they are hurt or unhappy. Relationships between adults and the pupils are warm and mutually respectful. Pupils with social and emotional difficulties are managed effectively.

The spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils is fostered successfully in most regards although little emphasis is given to acts of collective worship. However, the spiritual dimension was evident in an outstanding singing assembly for Key Stage 2, which was joyous and life-enhancing. A residential visit to Wales has also enabled the pupils in Year 6 to share new experiences and appreciate the richness and diversity of learning. The pupils at Key Stage 2 benefit from specialist teaching in several arts subjects which strengthens their understanding of cultural activities.

Attendance, which was 89 per cent in the final year of the predecessor schools, was 95 per cent for the autumn term and 93.6 per cent for the spring term. The decline, which takes the figure well below the national average for primary schools, is largely accounted for by reception pupils not taking up their places in January but whom the academy has not been authorised to remove from the register. The rate of attendance is significantly better at Key Stage 2 than in the lower part of the school. The procedures for monitoring attendance are satisfactory and there are clear lines of responsibility for learning mentors, the family liaison officer and the education welfare officer.

The quality of teaching was satisfactory or better in 14 lessons, including five in which it was good, five in which it was very good and one in which it was excellent. However, it was unsatisfactory in six lessons. There was a significant contrast in

the quality of teaching in different parts of The Primary Section. Of seven lessons in the reception classes and Key Stage 1, four were unsatisfactory, whereas of 13 lessons at Key Stage 2, only two were unsatisfactory and nine, a very high proportion, were good or better. The academy is aware of the range of quality and has been working to improve areas of weakness.

The use of specialist teachers for English and mathematics in Year 6, and for science, ICT, music and art across Key Stage 2 has played an important part in establishing high quality teaching. In addition, several other experienced teachers in this part of the school are confident, knowledgeable and highly effective. Nearly all of the teaching at Key Stage 2 was stimulating, purposeful and well structured. As well as making imaginative use of resources such as interactive white boards, these teachers had an unremitting focus on securing the pupils' understanding. They questioned individuals rigorously, gave opportunities for paired discussions and regularly refocused the pupils' attention on what they were learning. The energy and drive of many of the teachers were constant reminders to the pupils of the academy's high expectations.

The weakest teaching, mostly in the lower part of the school, lacked this sharp focus on raising standards. The teachers did not always make clear, for example, what they were trying to teach and often set tasks which were only tenuously related to an appropriate learning objective. The teaching lacked sufficient challenge and pace to interest the pupils or to ensure they made adequate progress. Lessons were poorly organised and the management of behaviour was sometimes ineffective.

Across the school, three specific aspects of teaching were particularly inconsistent in quality: lesson planning, assessment and the use of teaching assistants. The clarity and precision of lesson plans varied widely, with some of the weakest teaching precariously based on the least substantial planning. The use of assessment to spotlight what the pupils had understood or needed to revisit was generally underemphasised; it was adequate only in the very best teaching. Marking, setting curricular targets and evaluating the pupils' progress to inform the next stage of planning were all areas of weakness. Finally, the deployment of teaching assistants in the first part of lessons, often failed to capitalise on their presence; only rarely did they do anything other than observe the teacher.

The staff have recently overhauled the long-term curriculum framework for Key Stages 1 and 2. The new framework ensures appropriate coverage and makes appropriate links between different subjects and units of work. It is suitably supported by nationally agreed schemes of work. It also gives scope for the academy's emphasis on broadening the pupils' experiences through visits and enrichment activities to be maintained. All staff have had an input into the shape

of the curriculum for their year group and this aspect of the work has given them a sense of ownership and a deeper understanding of what is to be taught and when. However, the implementation of the revised framework is at an early stage and it is too soon to say whether it is more effective than the previous one. Work remains to make sure that the time allocations in each class's timetable are appropriate for the intended units of work. Much greater attention also needs to be given to developing the rigour and consistency with which literacy and numeracy are planned and taught.

The quality of provision in the reception classes is unsatisfactory overall. The teachers have established good relationships with their pupils and the atmosphere in the classes is generally settled; in this respect the pupils have had a good start to their school careers. However, the curriculum planning is not focused sharply enough on the pupils' learning needs to ensure that they make sufficient progress towards the early learning goals. The long-term plan consists of a list of topics and suggested activities, but they are not cross-referenced to the areas of learning and the stepping stones to ensure that there is appropriate and balanced coverage over time. There is no link between the Foundation Stage plans and those for Key Stage 1. The different approaches to planning and to grouping the pupils means that there is no parity of experience across the two classes. The purpose of activities is sometimes muddled because inappropriate links have been made with the term's topic. The classrooms are tidy and well organised, but lack stimulus and vitality.

The poor use of assessment in teaching has already been highlighted; it is also a major deficiency at a whole-school level. The absence of regularly updated information about the pupils' progress, for instance in writing, prevents The Primary Section from monitoring attainment, identifying trends, promoting higher standards and evaluating the curriculum. The academy has rightly identified that The Primary Section made too little progress in the first two terms in implementing systems to aid self-evaluation.

The provision for special educational needs is satisfactory but the co-ordinator lacks experience and depends heavily on the support of the co-ordinator for Key Stages 3 and 4, whose role is being extended to embrace the academy as a whole. Individual education plans have been reviewed and updated in full consultation with parents and the pupils. The targets are sufficiently detailed and there are useful ideas for resources and activities. However, the review dates are not always clear and there are no milestones to indicate the date by when targets are to be achieved.

A significant restructuring of the leadership team has only recently been completed. An assistant principal has taken on the role of acting principal and the deputy executive principal has moved from the secondary school to oversee developments

in The Primary Section. The responsibilities of other senior staff have been changed to sharpen up accountability, an issue which the academy identified was hindering progress. The academy has shown strength in its strategic leadership by recognising that The Primary Section was not making sufficient progress on implementing its action plan, diagnosing the reasons and taking vigorous action.

The co-ordinators for the core subjects spoke positively of the way they now feel more empowered to direct improvement rather than having to work through teams in the previous “flat” structure of management. There are well-prioritised action plans for each subject and, for example in the case of literacy, specific actions identified for each year group to improve provision and tackle underachievement in a more concerted manner. It is too early to identify the impact of the restructuring of the leadership team but the senior managers report that there has been an upsurge in confidence and increased cohesion among staff, who now feel clearer about a range of matters.

The chair of governors is in daily contact with the executive principal and has a keen understanding of the issues facing the academy. There are monthly management meetings which the chair attends as well as termly meetings of the full governing body. Close and productive links have been maintained with the Department for Education and Skills.

The Primary Section is well placed to continue to move forward. In two terms, much has been achieved, particularly in establishing a positive ethos and an ambitious outlook. The pupils report that they like their new school and that they have to work hard. They behave well and show pride in wearing the school’s uniform. Standards of work at Key Stage 2 are improving securely. Most of the staff are capable and committed to the academy’s success, and the academy has accurately identified where there are weaknesses in the teaching and has provided a range of support. However, important time has been lost and the academy, with urgency, needs to establish anew or embed many of the leadership and management processes that are required to achieve its aspirational goals. Issues it needs to tackle include:

- monitoring and evaluation are at an early stage and have been heavily reliant on external partners;
- the gathering and analysis of assessment data are inadequate;
- the action plan for The Primary Section is weak and needs a thorough review to define with greater precision the actions to be taken, measurable outcomes and more urgent deadlines;
- further work is needed to clarify the exact roles to be played by members of the leadership team;
- the leadership of the Foundation Stage is ineffective.

Nevertheless, The Primary Section has made reasonable progress towards implementing its action plan and raising attainment.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Division at the DfES. This letter will also be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Rob Hubbleday
HM Inspector of Schools

cc chair of governors
the Academies Division, DfES