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Ms Fiona Cordeaux  
Principal  
Walthamstow Academy  
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Dear Ms Cordeaux

## Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Walthamstow Academy

### Introduction

Following my visit with Jacqueline White HMI to your academy on 27 and 28 February 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring visit in connection with the academies initiative.

This letter 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.

### Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, staff holding key roles in raising achievement, groups of staff and students, the chair of governors, and a representative of the sponsors.

### Context

Walthamstow Academy is an 11-18 co-educational secondary school created in September 2006 following the closure of its 11-16 predecessor, The McEntee School. The sponsor of the academy is the United Learning Trust which currently runs several academies. In January 2008, barely two months ago, the academy moved into its new buildings. It specialises in mathematics, science and business and enterprise. The academy is smaller than the average secondary school with 718 students including 38 in Year 12. The sixth form was opened in September 2007.

The academy serves a part of London that includes areas of deprivation. Mobility is high in some year groups and 39% of the students currently in Year 11 did not start

in Year 7 at the predecessor school. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals is well above average. Roughly a quarter of students are from White British backgrounds, far fewer than on average. Others are from a wide range of backgrounds and many have a Black or Asian heritage. The proportion of students whose first language is not English is also well above average but relatively few are at an early stage of learning English. The percentage of students with learning difficulties or disabilities is well above average but the percentage with statements of special educational needs is average.

The academy has a full complement of teaching staff, roughly a third of whom transferred from the predecessor school. The academy has several vacancies in support staff. The academy reports a threefold increase in first choice applications and sees this as reflecting its increased popularity and standing in the community.

### Achievement and standards

A year and a half since opening, the academy is showing the capacity to speed up students' rate of progress, although much still remains to be done to lift standards, particularly in literacy. The academy has worked well to raise students' aspirations and encourage them to aim high.

Standards on entry to the academy are well below average and many students join with reading skills that are much lower than might be expected for their ages. Relatively few students join Year 7 with levels of attainment at or above expected levels.

Results in national tests in Year 9 were showing a rising trend from 2003 to 2006 in the predecessor school but dipped significantly in English in 2007. Results rose in mathematics and science but, in all three core subjects, results are still significantly below the national average. Students' progress was not as good from Years 7 to 9, based on the most recent set of results, as in previous years. The academy explains this as being largely due to considerable changes in staffing in its first year, in both English and science, with a large number of newly qualified teachers, and also on a decision taken to ensure that GCSE examination classes were given priority. GCSE examination results in 2007 show a significant improvement on those of the predecessor school. Standards are still well below average, however. The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A\*-C went up from 18 to 42 and the percentage including English and mathematics went up from 15 to 28. The variation in GCSE results between subjects is marked and shows the different rates of students' progress in the subjects. For example, mathematics results were similar to the national average and students' progress from Years 7 to Year 11 was outstanding. Results in English, however, were significantly below average and showed progress to be considerably lower than for mathematics. In most subjects where results were particularly weak in 2007, action has been taken with a view to remedying shortcomings, mainly in relation to aspects of teaching and learning and in the curriculum.

Based on 2007 results and taking account of the students' academic starting points and other factors, progress from Year 7 to Year 9 is now broadly average but with relative weaknesses in English. Progress over Years 10 and 11 is significantly lower than average overall. Boys' achievement is not as good as girls' and the academy is exploring ways in which to narrow this gap.

The sixth form has been set up successfully in many ways but the academy has been slow in its first year to evaluate students' overall progress in Year 12. Performance data are being gathered and a thorough analysis is about to take place. Year 12 students do nevertheless benefit from subject teachers' scrutiny of their individual progress.

Throughout the academy, standards of literacy are particularly low and staff are fully aware of the need to raise these urgently. Standards in speaking are low but students show a willingness to share their ideas and contribute opinions and are encouraged to do so in the best lessons; this is helping them to formulate their thoughts clearly. Writing is very variable with many errors appearing in spelling, grammar and punctuation. Some errors persist in students' exercise books in spite of the teacher's marking because they are not followed up systematically.

Students know their minimum expected grades (MEGs) and the more challenging value-added grades (VAGs) and can speak about how they are currently performing in relation to these. Many can also explain what needs to be done to reach the next grade or level and this understanding should be strengthened for all. The academy's system of frequently assessing students' attainment is effective in encouraging students to do their best. Whilst systems for tracking students' progress have been extended in the last year and are now generally robust, the academy has rightly identified the need to continue development work in this area so that data are used to even greater effect and more consistently across all subjects to promote high achievement. Students who took GCSE examinations last year praise the extra revision classes that were provided and teachers' readiness to support them when required.

### Personal development and well-being

There are many positive features in students' personal development. Most students have good attitudes to work and learning. Behaviour is good in lessons and around the academy with few disruptions, although these do occur and impede learning in some lessons. Students are friendly, courteous and respectful. They arrive to lessons punctually, in the main. Those few who do not always show such qualities, or have other specific concerns about being in school are supported well individually. Exclusions have been reduced in the last year because the academy is working well to keep students in school and values the support of various local authority agencies in this respect and in promoting good behaviour. Attendance figures for the last full academic year were below average. Attendance has improved, however, because appropriate steps have been taken to keep a rigorous check on attendance and follow up absences. Attendance rates, based on the first half of this academic year,

are in line with the national average of last year. Rewards for good attendance are received with delight in assemblies.

The academy, through its programme of personal, social and health education and through other means, enables students to grow well in their understanding of how to lead safe and healthy lives. Students say the academy is a safe place to be in and one student, with nods of agreement from others said: 'Strict rules are working'. Students praise the staff for setting clear expectations of work and behaviour and for insisting upon them. They also praise the systems of rewards and sanctions which they say are fairly administered. They say improvements to these expectations and systems over the last year have spurred on good behaviour and attitudes. The new building has added greatly to students' pleasure in learning and they value the improved facilities. The school council is growing in effectiveness but has yet to develop more fully as a vehicle for change and a conduit for the students' views. Students in the sixth form are finding ways, with encouragement from staff, to contribute to the life of the academy as supervisors in the 'Agora' and in attending parents' evenings as ambassadors for the academy, for example. Students in all years are helped to view their futures positively but weak literacy skills for many of them are impeding some aspects of their future economic well-being.

#### Quality of provision

The academy has made well-targeted efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning and shows clarity of purpose in this work. Nevertheless, further work is required in relation to providing appropriate levels of challenge for all students, particularly the more able, and in increasing some teachers' skills in diagnosing the extent of students' learning lesson by lesson.

Students were seen learning most successfully in lessons where learning objectives were matched closely to their needs and where a good range of activities, delivered at a snappy pace, sustained their interest. Students enjoyed positive relationships in nearly all of the 17 lessons, or parts of lessons, observed which were generally satisfactory or good. Such relationships are giving them the confidence to participate and develop their ideas in collaboration with others. Where high expectations for work and behaviour were non-negotiable, the students lifted their performance accordingly. Not all lessons shared these positive features. In some, students found the work too hard or too easy because teachers had not used assessment information well to ensure they were appropriately challenged. Some lessons were over-directed by the teacher and opportunities for students to extend their thinking and test out their learning independently were missed. Whilst some teachers are adept at gauging the extent of students' learning in lessons others did not do this thoroughly enough. Existing good practice in teaching and learning is not yet being sufficiently shared.

The curriculum is improving. At Key Stage 3, it is under review and developments in Key Stage 4 now give students a reasonably wide choice of subjects and vocational courses. Increased breadth and flexibility in the curriculum are helping to motivate

students and raise achievement. The extent to which the academy's specialisms of business and enterprise and mathematics and science have made an impact across the curriculum is still limited. Significant improvements in resources for learning, such as the interactive whiteboards and good access to computers, are helping to engage students, raise achievement and add enjoyment to their learning.

The academy is putting strategies in place to address many students' weaknesses in literacy. The new learning resource centre is shortly to be opened and aims to present opportunities to develop students' literacy skills and establish the habit of reading for pleasure. The development of literacy skills is not yet embedded in lessons across the curriculum. Support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities is well co-ordinated and planned for, but capacity to follow plans through in lessons is sometimes limited because there are still rather few learning support assistants. The academy is launching a recruitment campaign to resolve this problem. Shortcomings exist in provision and support for students with English as an additional language. The current arrangements for some students are stifling their enjoyment of learning and their personal development, and do not give them an adequate range of educational experiences. This provision is in need of urgent attention and adjustment.

### Leadership and management

The principal's clarity of vision and determination to realise a better future for students is driving improvement at a pace. Governors share her ambition. Together, they work well as a skilful team to shape the strategic direction of the academy. It is clear that as new policies and procedures become firmly established, their impact on improving outcomes for students increases. For example, the behaviour management policy is applied well. It emphasises learning as the priority and students are responding positively and meeting its expectations.

Senior leaders have an accurate grasp of the academy's strengths and areas for development. With the principal, they are establishing robust systems for monitoring and evaluation. Middle leaders are becoming more involved in these processes but there is more work to do in some cases in terms of developing leaders' capacity to assure the quality of the work of their teams and drive improvement themselves. Procedures for line management are making teachers increasingly accountable for students' progress. Systems for tracking progress and intervening to remedy any underachievement are strongest in Key Stage 4, where the academy has expended most effort to date. Not all subject leaders, however, use assessment information well to ensure that students are given precise curricular targets for improvement or are provided with suitably challenging lessons.

Good opportunities for professional development exist, and link coherently with academy improvement plans and the individual needs of staff. Teamwork is becoming a strength and, increasingly, staff welcome opportunities to take responsibility and learn from each other. Effective teamwork, for example, underpinned the smooth transition into new buildings. The teaching staff structure is

more established than the support staff structure. The latter is still developing, with some vacancies to fill. This process of transition to new staffing structures is being appropriately managed.

Students' achievement and well-being are at the heart of the ongoing development of leadership and management. Strong foundations have been laid to secure good capacity for future improvement.

#### External support

The academy has been placed on a firm footing for further development and has worked in close and valued partnership with the sponsors and the local authority in particular to achieve this. It has built on school improvement work started in the predecessor school. Other support comes from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, a range of consultants, and through links with other academies and independent schools within and beyond the United Learning Trust. The support and links have been instrumental in strengthening aspects of leadership and management, for example. The academy has worked well in liaising with primary schools to gain a good knowledge of prospective students' needs and abilities.

#### Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- Give greater clarity, cohesion and impetus to the work of improving, across the curriculum, students' literacy skills, providing staff development where necessary
- Improve, as a matter of urgency, provision and support for students with English as an additional language.
- Develop further teachers' skills in making the best possible use of data on students' attainment to speed up their rate of progress; ensure that analysis of students' progress is undertaken as planned in the sixth form, and at an earlier point in the year in future.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the chair of governors, and the Academies Group at the DCSF.

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola  
HM Inspector of Schools