

Prospects Learning Services Ltd
Prospects House
19 Elmfield Road
Bromley, Kent
BR1 1LT

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 020 8315 1250
Direct F 020 8315 1279
Viola.Hola@ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms Carolyn English
Principal
Harris Academy South Norwood
Cumberlow Avenue
South Norwood
London
SE25 6AE

Dear Ms English

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Harris Academy South Norwood

Introduction

Following my visit with Sheena MacDonald HMI to your academy on 13 and 14 January 2009, 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, including lessons; scrutinised documents; and met with the principal and other senior staff, groups of staff and students, and the chief executive of the Harris Federation who is also a governor.

Context

The academy opened in September 2007 in a new building on the site of the predecessor school Stanley Technical High School for Boys aged 11 to 16. It is one of seven academies in South London, sponsored by Lord Harris of Peckham, that work in federation with each other. It has a specialism in business and enterprise, and a joint sixth form with Harris City Academy Crystal Palace and Harris Academy Merton.

In Years 9 to 11, there are 410 boys who transferred from the predecessor school. A total of 430 boys and girls are now in Years 7 and 8. Harris Academy South Norwood has 154 students in the joint sixth form.

A quarter of students are White British, another quarter have a Caribbean background, and half are from a wide range of other backgrounds. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is well above average, as is the proportion who speak English as an additional language. A much higher than average percentage of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Attainment on entry varies. It was well below average for many students. For those currently in Years 7 and 8, it was closer to average overall.

About half of the staff from Stanley High School moved to this academy and one member joined the academy leadership group. The majority of the transferring staff have now left, and have been replaced predominantly with newly qualified teachers.

Achievement and standards

A great deal has been achieved in just over a year to create a very positive and inclusive climate for learning. The academy has made good progress in speeding up students' progress and in raising standards, particularly in English and mathematics.

Standards as seen in the 2008 GCSE outcomes showed an overall improvement on those in the predecessor school but were still well below average in many respects. The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSEs with grades A*–C including English and mathematics rose from 23% in 2007 (in the predecessor school) to 30% in 2008. In addition, because some students had been entered for the adult literacy and numeracy tests, the percentage gaining these GCSE grades, including functional English and mathematics, was 57% in 2008. GCSE results were relatively high in English language, mathematics, science and physical education compared to other subjects students took. They were relatively low in art and design, design and technology, geography and English literature. The 2008 GCSE results showed that the cohort of students made good overall progress, and exceptionally high progress in English and mathematics. Overall progress over Years 10 and 11, for students with a first language other than English and for boys with a Caribbean background, was on average significantly lower than that found nationally although their progress in English and mathematics was generally closer to that of other students.

Results in the national tests at the end of Year 9 also improved, most noticeably in English where they were broadly in line with the national average. Results in mathematics and science were still below average. In the sixth form, outcomes in AS-level examinations and Levels 2 and 3 Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) courses taken by students in Year 12 in 2008 showed achievement in line with or better than predictions based on their GCSE results.

The main factors underpinning improvements in achievement and standards are: students' improved attendance, behaviour and attitudes to work and learning; better continuity and increased effectiveness in teaching and learning; the creation of a curriculum that is flexible and meets students' needs, interests and aspirations; well-targeted intervention programmes for students at risk of underachieving; and the academy's very careful checking of students' progress.

The academy is continuing to move forward with these improvements and can demonstrate their positive impact on educational outcomes for current students through a very thorough system of regular assessment. Target-setting is at a high level of challenge. The academy has rightly identified the need to lift further skills in literacy and oracy which are weak for many students, particularly the older ones. While these skills are developed well in some lessons across the curriculum, this is not yet routinely the case.

Personal development and well-being

Students have responded very well to the academy's very positive 'can do' ethos which celebrates and rewards both achievement and endeavour. They speak of having their aspirations raised and demonstrate enthusiasm for all that the academy has to offer. They feel highly supported both by staff and by other students. Behaviour in lessons and around the academy is good. Fixed-term exclusions have fallen dramatically because behaviour management systems are understood, effective and consistently applied. In addition, the use of the internal exclusion centre allows for continuity of attendance and learning for those few students unable to work in lessons for any reason. Attendance and punctuality have improved greatly.

The academy's specialism of business and enterprise makes a very positive contribution to students' personal development. It supports in particular students' economic well-being, which is also being enhanced through rising standards in English and mathematics, the extensive use of information and communication technology (ICT), and the many opportunities provided for working collaboratively in groups. The academy has achieved Healthy School status. It has many ways of encouraging students to express their views. Students know that their opinions matter and are respected and responded to.

Quality of provision

The academy's focus and drive on securing the best possible quality of teaching and learning are impressive. They are resulting in clear improvements, which are evident in the extensive and thorough records of lessons checked by senior staff. Staff comment positively on the support, encouragement and challenge they receive from managers and colleagues. One student stated, 'Teachers seem excited by teaching us', and others make similar comments of appreciation.

During the visit, no unsatisfactory lessons were seen, many were good, and a few were outstanding. Assessment information is becoming increasingly accurate and teachers generally use it effectively to plan activities to meet the range of needs in the class. Most lessons provide varied and interesting activities, and students applaud this. Learning objectives and outcomes are shared with students so that in most cases everyone is able to identify the extent of success and the next steps in learning. In the better lessons, the pace is brisk, expectations are high, and students respond with enthusiasm and are often involved in assessing their own and their peers' work. In some lessons, the level of challenge is not high enough for students or the pace is too slow. The academy has correctly identified the need to further ensure that in all lessons students receive work that closely matches their needs and abilities. Work is in progress to lift further students' skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening across all areas of the curriculum. Some teachers are clear about how their subjects contribute to this, others less so.

The curriculum has many strengths and contributes greatly to students' enjoyment as well as achievement. A wide range of vocational courses is offered to students in Years 10 and 11 and in the sixth form. Sixth-form students, in particular, value greatly the opportunities available through the joint provision with two other academies. Flexibility, personalisation and intervention are key features of provision for younger students as well as for those aged over 14. The vision statement 'Achieving Excellence through Enterprise' is being lived out unmistakably. The academy reviews its curriculum frequently, and includes feedback from students, so that schemes of work are routinely revised. Time is used well for learning and includes 'Flexible Friday', for which there is much enthusiasm from both staff and students. On Fridays, students work in depth on a range of interesting activities organised by faculties. Students are very enthusiastic about what the academy has to offer and there is good take-up of the many enrichment activities.

The extensive and effective systems for keeping a check on students' personal and academic progress enable staff to know students and their needs very well indeed, and to provide additional support and guidance as necessary. The quality of marking and verbal feedback to students varies from class to class but the six-weekly reviews of students' performance are regarded by staff and students as very valuable in maintaining the impetus on progress. Systems for ensuring students' health and safety are entirely robust.

Leadership and management

Leaders and managers have been successful in building a positive ethos among staff and students, motivating them to aim high in all they do, and in seeking to build an academy of high repute. Tremendous attention is given to keeping a check on the quality of lessons, and on students' work and progress. Evaluation is rigorous and accurate, and responded to swiftly with actions for improvement. Students speak of how the academy runs extremely smoothly and praise the educational provision they receive, the new building and its facilities and, most importantly, the teachers.

Inspectors found great clarity of purpose in every aspect of the academy's work. The good progress being made in raising standards and achievement owe much to the specific skills of the principal, her calm and undaunted persistence, the wisely assembled and effective leadership team, the faculty structure that supports students' academic and personal development, and the close collaboration with other Harris academies working under a chief executive who played and is playing a vital part in the setting up and development of this academy and others in the Harris group.

Plans for development of the academy are entirely appropriate, clearly articulated, and honestly and comprehensively evaluated. There is no reason to believe that the academy will not continue to develop at a good rate in the future given progress so far and the high quality of leadership and management.

External support

Staff speak very positively about the benefits of working in partnership within the federation of Harris academies. The federation has undoubtedly contributed to this academy's good progress in raising students' standards and achievements in that expertise across the federation has been and is being shared. For example, the Harris academy principals and other staff engage in a wide range of professional development activities to the benefit of students, bringing in external expertise and support as and when necessary. This academy also values the support of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and the support and challenge of its School Improvement Partner.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Extend further the academy's work on improving students' literacy skills by strengthening the contributions all teachers make to raising standards of oracy and writing.
- Increase the proportion of good lessons; in particular, ensure that even more lessons provide suitably challenging tasks for the range of students in them.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
H M Inspector

cc Mr Phillip Saunders, chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF