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Mr I Johnson
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Dear Mr Johnson

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Spires Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Linda McGill HMI to your academy on 7-8 July 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.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, various staff, groups of pupils, the chair of trustees and a representative of the sponsors.

Context

Spires Academy opened in September 2007 with a core of staff who remained from the predecessor school working alongside a new headteacher, deputy headteacher and others. Initial plans to federate with a local grammar school came to nothing and the academy is now in a soft (but extensive) federation with the Marlowe Academy. In March 2008, the principal of Marlowe took over from the headteacher and deputy headteacher, becoming principal of Spires Academy as an additional role. He has been supported by a school manager at Spires who retires at the end of this term. A new school leader had just started in post at the time of the visit ready to take over in September 2009.

Spires Academy is very small with just under 70 pupils in each of the five year groups, except Year 7, which has 110. Few pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds and few speak English as an additional language. While the proportion



that have additional educational needs is high, the proportion with statements of special educational needs is very low.

The academy has specialist status in business and enterprise, and in performing and creative arts. It is currently housed in the old school buildings but approval has now been given to the building project that will create new accommodation.

Achievement and standards

Pupils join the academy with low prior attainment, particularly in literacy and mathematics. The academy's tracking data and the books of pupils in Key Stage 3 indicate that many, especially boys, continue to struggle with basic skills and with their presentation. This is holding them back with their learning significantly. They are, however, beginning to catch up and are making satisfactory progress. The academy has taken steps to support individuals and groups with these skills and rightly plans further focus on developing literacy and other basic skills across the whole curriculum.

Current Year 11 pupils have made good progress from low starting points when they joined the academy. The school's tracking data indicate that a very high proportion will have achieved a good clutch of GCSEs and their equivalent. Standards in English, science and mathematics all improved this year. Despite their good progress, however, the proportion of current Year 11 achieving five higher level grades at GCSE including English and mathematics is likely to remain well below the national average. Year 10 have made a good start to Key Stage 4 but leaders recognise that there is much to be done to ensure that a reasonable proportion reach this benchmark.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils are proud of the academy and of their achievements, and are pleased with the growing good reputation that the academy is acquiring. They are supportive of each other and generally, when well taught, eager to do well. Increasingly, through the efforts of staff, pupils are learning to take responsibility and articulate their opinions in a constructive manner on things of importance, such as the quality of teaching. Their attendance in all year groups has improved over the last year.

The support and guidance centre gives strong support to those who, for various reasons, find it difficult to manage their behaviour and emotions, and this is helping them. Pupils and staff feel that behaviour has improved a great deal at the academy and this is borne out by the significant reduction in fixed-term exclusions that has been achieved. However, some pupils occasionally resort to silly and disruptive behaviour which interferes with their learning.

Bullying is not a source of concern to pupils, who also feel that there is very little racism in school. They feel safe and well cared for and know that there are adults that will listen to them if they need help. Pupils are aware of how to live healthily

and many enjoy a wide range of sporting and other extra-curricular activities. They note accurately, that while some meals at the school canteen are healthy, this is not true of all of them and also, that portion sizes are small.

Quality of provision

As a result of the time of year, the teaching seen on this visit was all in Key Stage 3. It ranged from inadequate to good but was, for the most part, satisfactory. Planning was detailed, but rarely included plans for the deployment of teaching assistants. In most lessons, the relationships between teachers and pupils were very positive. Teachers generally took care to make their lessons interesting and enable their pupils to undertake stimulating tasks. However, often, there was too much focus on 'doing' with too little focus on 'learning'. This carried through to the final section of lessons when the recap and overview of the learning was often scant and unhelpful. In some lessons, teachers used questioning really well to allow pupils to think things through.

Most lessons could have been improved by:

- A sharp focus on tightly identified learning objectives throughout the lesson and revisited as a plenary at the end of the lesson.
- Teachers talking less, asking more open questions and allowing pupils more time to work things out and make connections,
- Teachers making sure that the work given to each pupil closely matched their learning need in terms of challenge, which may entail pupils doing different things, using different books or having different amounts of support from teaching assistants and supporting materials.

Many of those pupils who have trouble with literacy skills find it hard to present their work well. Looking at their books it was clear that some will need more support with this and that across the academy there is not a consistent approach to ensuring that reasonable standards of presentation are maintained. In addition, pupils' work is not marked with sufficient frequency and not all teachers offer pupils helpful feedback to enable them to take steps to improve their work.

Pupils respond well to good teaching, they concentrate and work steadily, and in these lessons complete a reasonable amount of work.

The curriculum offers a very wide range of enrichment activities, some of which reflect the academy's specialisms. The many educational trips are highly appreciated by students who value the opportunities they afford to broaden their horizons and enjoy learning in different environments. The academy is rightly developing the formal curriculum to expand the range of vocational options. They increasingly work with the Marlowe Academy and other outside providers to enhance the choice for Key Stage 4 and offer individual placements to those pupils for whom this is helpful. The performing arts curriculum and extra-curricular activities are a strength of the academy and students say that their participation in these increases

their confidence. There is a good range of opportunities linked to business and enterprise with significant further developments planned for September.

Pupils who use the support and guidance centre are very appreciative of both the additional learning opportunities provided and, on occasion, the emotional support offered. There is close monitoring of the progress that individuals make and the support given is tailored to individual need. New systems are in place to ensure that pupils are appropriately supported and that the particular needs of individuals are well met. As a result, a higher proportion than previously access the curriculum and thrive at the academy. There is a strong awareness of the importance of developing the basic skills of many pupils and specialist teaching and support is given, particularly to pupils in Key Stage 3. Satisfactory systems are in place to ensure that pupils are safe and that the needs of those who require more specialist help than is available at the school are met.

Leadership and management

The trustees of the academy have appropriately high expectations. They support and challenge the institution well, holding leaders to account fairly but rigorously. They have been prepared to implement difficult decisions. They are appropriately involved in strategic development and have worked behind the scenes to secure arrangements that promote the interests of pupils.

In federating with the Marlowe Academy and appointing a new principal, the trustees have brought a wealth of leadership and educational skills to Spires. Senior leadership is now strong. The principal has given a vision for the future, a clear sense of direction, order and control. Self-evaluation procedures are robust and future plans are appropriate. This includes a firm commitment to partnership working with a range of other partners, including local primary schools, to promote learning in the community. Within the senior leadership team, there is a sense of urgency and challenging targets are set. The progress of individual pupils is now closely monitored. Planned further analysis and widespread sharing of the information yielded is intended to enable teachers to be properly aware of the impact of their work and leaders at levels to focus their efforts wisely. Having had a slower start than planned, the academy is now demonstrating good capacity for improvement.

While there is some good work done at middle leadership level, senior leaders are aware that their next steps are to develop leadership at this level further. Plans are in place to enable these people to direct learning, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their areas and plan for improvement.

External support

The academy's federation with the Marlowe Academy has greatly supported developments over the last 18 months, not least through the appointment of the principal to lead Spires. Other leaders from Marlowe have participated in developing

the capacity of leaders at the Spires while teachers have contributed expertise. The opportunities that the federation has afforded to increase the range of the formal and enrichment curriculum are very beneficial to pupils at Spires.

Through their own businesses and through their business contacts, the sponsors have enabled the academy to draw on a wide range of business skills, such as information and communication technology and marketing from the local business community.

Close working with Kent County Council through the local children's partnership has supported the academy well, particularly in regard to the development of the support and guidance department. The academy has maintained a high profile in the Canterbury 14-19 partnership and their diploma arrangements which has enabled the range of options to pupils of this age to be extended. This includes work done by Canterbury College to support 'Aim Higher' pupils and others develop their thinking about progression routes after they finish at the academy.

Consultants from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust have supported the academy well by working with newly qualified teachers and developing leaders' lesson observation skills. In addition, partnership work with Christ Church University is enabling the academy to develop as a learning community by offering significant professional development opportunities to staff.

The School Improvement partner has provided regular, clear-sighted support.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, [*same person at Academies Group as in cc. list below*], the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Emma Ing

Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk]