

Suite 22 West
Lancs
Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

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

Direct T 01695 566930
Direct F 01695 729320

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Ms Elaine Cropper, Head of Delivery &
Ms Jane Miles, Head of Operations
Sheffield Springs Academy
Hurlfield Road
Sheffield
South Yorkshire
S12 2SF

Dear Ms Cropper and Ms Miles

Ofsted monitoring of schools with a notice to improve

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your academy on 27 January 2010 and for the information which you provided during my visit. Please also pass on my thanks to the staff, governors and students who I met and spoke with during my visit.

Since the last inspection the Principal has left the academy. Leadership of the academy has been provided jointly by the head of delivery and the head of operations. The recruitment process to appoint a new substantive principal was in progress during the monitoring visit. The academy has not experienced significant changes in staffing, although vacancies exist currently in the posts of subject leaders for English and science.

By arrangement with the sponsor, United Learning Trust (ULT), three additional senior staff have been seconded to Springs Academy on a part-time basis from Manchester Academy. An associate vice-principal, appointed to ULT's school improvement team, has also been seconded to work part time with senior leaders, taking responsibility for improvement in science. Additional members of ULT's school improvement team have been made available to work with staff on specific areas for improvement, for example in mathematics and science. The deputy chief executive for ULT academies in the north has been assigned to work with the academy to offer strategic support and challenge for leaders as required.

The joint governing body of the two academies in Sheffield has been restructured by ULT. A local governing body has been established to take responsibility for holding Springs Academy to account. It will hold its first meeting in February.

The academy's National Challenge Adviser and School Improvement Partner has recently been appointed as regional executive director for ULT in the North. He will shortly take on an executive role within the academy until the new principal is inducted into the post. A change in the role of the National Challenge Adviser over the last term has been managed smoothly as a result of the collaboration and support provided by the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCSF) and the ULT. A new School Improvement Partner has also been appointed to work with the academy.

As a result of the inspection on 14 May 2009, the academy was asked to:

- raise achievement, especially at Key Stage 3
- improve students' basic skills, particularly in literacy, to enable them to flourish as independent learners
- improve the quality of teaching by tackling weaknesses in provision, capitalising on best practice and using information about students' learning needs to improve lesson planning and enable better assessment of the steps in their progress
- develop the quality of strategic leadership at all levels, including governance, to secure more rapid improvement.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy is making satisfactory progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising students' achievement.

Students' attainment is rising from a low baseline. Results from examinations taken in 2009 indicate that Year 11 students made at least satisfactory progress relative to their starting points. Adaptations to the curriculum, including a range of vocational courses, resulted in a rapid rise in the proportion of students attaining five good passes at GCSE or their equivalent. However, the proportion of students attaining five good passes including English and mathematics remains low. Although challenging academy targets were exceeded, results were below targets set through the National Challenge initiative. Teachers' assessments confirm that students' attainment by the end of Key Stage 3 remains low and that progress in English, mathematics and science is unsatisfactory.

Students' attendance has risen over recent months and was over 90% at the time of the monitoring visit. Leaders are working closely with older students who do not attend regularly enough to increase their chances of achieving qualifications that will help them in their future lives.

Since the last inspection the head of delivery and head of operations have worked together effectively, to establish a clear direction and strong sense of purpose among staff at all levels. They have challenged weaknesses in practice across the academy and redefined senior roles and responsibilities to take advantage of existing

strengths. Actions taken have restored confidence among staff and provided firm foundations on which to build.

A broad range of strategies has been implemented to tackle the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection. Structural changes have been made to the school day and to arrangements for teaching to promote a positive climate for learning and to raise achievement. Assessment information is gathered more regularly and analysed to review the progress made by different groups of students in all subjects. Leaders acknowledge that this process requires further refinement in order to accelerate students' progress further. However, the information available has informed the recent regrouping of students in Key Stage 3 so that teachers can plan more precisely to meet their diverse range of needs.

The quality of teaching has improved and the proportion that is inadequate has reduced. Leaders know where strengths and weaknesses lie in teaching as a result of a programme of observations. Where teaching is most effective, students are given the opportunity to work together to solve problems or to investigate 'the big question' for learning. They enjoy using modern technologies that engage them more actively in their learning. A teaching and learning group has been established including representatives from all subject areas to share good practice. This group has also taken responsibility for developing a common approach to different aspects of teaching including a format for lesson planning, marking students' work and behaviour management. Evidence gathered by leaders indicates that behaviour is improving and that in most lessons a suitable climate for learning has been established. Teachers routinely use the agreed format for lesson planning which focuses their attention on improving literacy skills as well as the needs of different groups of pupils in their class. However, planning does not always identify the small steps required to enable all students to achieve the objective or to make the progress they might. Furthermore, marking does not always provide specific guidance to help lower attaining students to identify how they can improve their work.

Progress on improving students' basic skills, including literacy, has been uneven. Strategies to improve the reading ages of younger students have proved effective and there are examples of good practice in teaching to promote the development of speaking, listening and writing skills. However, these strategies are not embedded across the curriculum. Leadership responsibility for this area for improvement has recently been re-allocated and additional support is being provided in order to develop ways of improving students' basic skills across the academy.

Senior leaders are becoming familiar with the new roles assigned to them in January 2010. This has involved some changes to the lines of accountability for middle leaders. However, during this period of transition, leaders and managers at all levels are growing in confidence to fulfil their roles effectively and know that they can seek support if required. The academy's statement of action was evaluated by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and judged to require amendments in order to increase

the precision with which progress made by the academy can be monitored and evaluated. At the time of the monitoring inspection, no amendment had been made to the statement of action. Evidence is regularly gathered by leaders and presented in a variety of ways to evaluate the impact of actions taken on students' outcomes. However, interim checks are not precise enough to check the progress towards long-term success criteria. Leaders acknowledge this and are beginning to prioritise next steps and identify the short- and medium-term criteria by which to measure progress more effectively. The recently appointed chair of governors has clear ambitions for the newly appointed leadership group and plans to increase governor involvement both within the academy and in the wider community.

Support provided by the National Challenge Adviser has continued to be effective and strategies that have benefited older students are being introduced to accelerate progress made by students in Key Stage 3. The sponsor has made available a wide range of support for the academy to increase its capacity to improve. Leaders have valued the support from seconded colleagues because it has been tailored to meet specific needs.

Suitable focus is being placed on developing the contribution of the subject specialisms to school improvement. Good practice in teaching, for example in the performing arts, is shared through the teaching and learning group. Links are being strengthened with primary feeder schools to ensure a smooth transition to the academy and opportunities are being taken to involve students in business-related activities.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your academy. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sara Morrissey
Her Majesty's Inspector