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Mrs Kate Robinson  
Principal  
Richard Rose Morton Academy  
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Dear Mrs Robinson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Richard Rose Morton Academy

## Introduction

Following my visit with Jane Austin HMI to your academy on 18-19 November 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

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

## Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal and senior leadership team, the chief executive, groups of middle leaders, various staff and groups of students. A telephone discussion was held with the chair of governors.

## Context

Richard Rose Morton Academy opened in September 2008. It is part of the Richard Rose Federation which also includes the Richard Rose Central Academy and the Richard Rose Sixth Form College. It currently occupies the buildings of its

predecessor, The Morton School, until new accommodation is ready in 2011. At present there are 583 students on roll including 55 in the sixth form. The new buildings will accommodate 1150 students including 250 in the post 16 provision. Sixth form students are taught in collaboration with the federated academy, with students transported between sites for specialist subject lessons. Additionally, a small number of Year 13 students also attend Caldew School for specific courses.

The academy's first year of operation witnessed a substantial change to its staffing base. In September 2008, eighty per cent of the teaching staff had previously been on the roll of the predecessor school. During the course of the year this had reduced to about one quarter. In addition, one third of the teaching staff were new in post at the beginning of the current term. This change caused significant disruption to students' education mainly due to the very high number of supply teachers employed to cover for those staff who left and before new appointments could take up their posts. Almost all of the senior leadership team are new appointments to the academy.

The proportion of minority ethnic students at the academy is low. The proportion of students entitled to a free school meal is however above average, and a much higher than average number has special educational needs and/or disabilities.

#### Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Students enter the academy with below average attainment although this varies from year to year. In 2009, results from the first GCSE examinations taken by academy students saw a nine per cent increase in the proportion attaining five or more good GCSE passes when compared to the predecessor school performance in 2008. However, when English and mathematics are included in this measure standards declined slightly and remain below the national floor target. Achievement overall for students in 2009 was inadequate. The performance of sixth form students showed a good improvement on the previous year's results. The proportion of students gaining A to E grades at GCE A level rose from 85% to 94%, with about a third being either grade A or B.

Results at Key Stage 4 in 2009 were adversely affected by the turbulent staffing situation and this was particularly evident in the English and mathematics departments. The response of the academy's leadership has been robust. Despite recruitment difficulties, the staffing situation in these subjects is now much improved through the appointment of a full team of subject specialists and new subject leaders. There is evidence of the impact of these staff on students results in the most recent assessments. The tracking of students' performance is increasingly rigorous and targets are challenging. This evidence suggests that a much higher proportion of students are on track to achieve five or more good GCSE grades including English and mathematics than at this time last year.

However, many changes are recent and require time to embed fully and become routine, not least because past under-achievement has left a legacy of major weaknesses in students' basic skills and low aspirations amongst many in the student body.

Students say they feel safe and are confident that help is available if required. However some comment that because of the large number of new teachers there is some uncertainty about who they can confide in. Students' behaviour is generally satisfactory, some is good while a small proportion of behaviour seen during the inspection was unsatisfactory. This was reflected in immature behaviour and poor attitudes towards their studies from a small number of students. However, the atmosphere in the academy is generally calm and the large majority of students display a secure awareness of the safety of others and adhere to the academy's expectations of their behaviour and conduct.

Students are well represented by the academy and house forums. Student Voice representatives show ambition in wanting to effectively represent their peers, taking their roles very seriously. Those students who were interviewed are proud of the academy and welcome the many changes which have been implemented. Attendance improved to broadly average levels in 2008-2009 as a result of strenuous efforts by academy staff. They are vigilant in monitoring attendance levels and are robust in following up unexplained absences. Targeted work with specific families has greatly reduced the proportion of persistent absentees.

#### The effectiveness of provision

The overall quality of teaching is satisfactory. A small proportion of lessons observed during the inspection were good; an equal proportion was inadequate. In the better lessons, effective use was made of the academy's agreed lesson planning format to identify the links between learning outcomes and activities. Learning was built up in small, manageable, sequential stages. Teachers' high expectations were evident in their challenging questions and the way in which they pressed students for full explanations of their answers. Students had opportunities to evaluate their own work and that of their peers against clear assessment criteria. Learning was carefully set in a context which was accessible and interesting to students. For example, in a history lesson an imaginative take on the television series 'Big Brother' helped students understand the impact of friction and alliances on situations of potential conflict prior to the outbreak of World War One.

Where teaching was satisfactory rather than good, activities were not matched sharply enough to the learning needs of all the students. Although the academy is collecting information about students' progress regularly, this is not being used widely or accurately enough in planning all lessons. As a consequence, activities do not focus sufficiently on the next steps needed to promote learning for individuals and groups of students. Combined with a narrow range of teaching strategies, this limits students' engagement and results in some inattention and low level

misbehaviour. In addition, students' weak basic skills present a barrier to their progress which, at times, makes them reluctant to tackle new learning. Where learning is inadequate, good work habits are not embedded, written work is poor quality with much unfinished, and presentation is scruffy. The quality of marking varies across the academy. There is some good practice with helpful comments and targets for improvement but this is not commonplace, leaving students uncertain about how to improve.

In sixth form lessons teachers' enthusiasm for their subject engages and motivates students well. Clear explanations and clarification of misconceptions stem from teachers' good subject knowledge. However, at times students lack the independent learning habits and skills needed for sixth-form study and this, combined with previous underachievement, hinders the progress of some students.

The academy provides a broad and balanced curriculum that meets students' needs adequately. When the academy opened, its curriculum was largely based on that of its predecessor school. The academy is now making the curriculum its own. The introduction of the 'Opening Minds' programme for Year 7 was premised on the federation's philosophy of providing students with the skills needed for lifelong learning. Leaders acted swiftly when this proved flawed, and a programme to develop students' personal learning and thinking skills has now been introduced. Although early signs are promising, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this change. Throughout Key Stages 3 and 4 three pathways are offered to match students' prior attainment. In Years 7 and 8 small nurture groups support vulnerable students with their learning and personal development. Further up the academy, a more flexible approach is resulting in increased numbers of early entries to examinations. At Key Stage 4 a broader range of courses, with a variety of learning styles and assessment methods better suited to students' needs and preferences, have been introduced.

The sixth form curriculum has been substantially remodelled, in the context of the federation, to better match students' needs and aspirations. Progression routes from Key Stage 4 are clear and the new curriculum ensures appropriate subject combinations are available. This includes a structured approach to offer level 2 courses mainly through a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) course in work skills. This is well staged to provide a firm foundation for apprenticeships or employment for those who do not wish to continue beyond Year 12. Well above average levels of attendance and retention are initial indicators of success. Improved advice and guidance have ensured that students are accessing appropriate courses.

Care, guidance and support are satisfactory. A system of four houses provides a coherent structure for this with clear responsibilities for staff in their various roles. Students appreciate the sense of belonging this provides. They say they feel well supported by team leaders and are motivated, for example to improve their attendance, by rewards and house competitions. Year 7 students say they have

been made welcome and given the help they need to settle into the academy. The structure places a strong, well-articulated emphasis on guiding and supporting students' learning. The systematic use of regularly collected data on attainment and progress forms the crux of this although its introduction is relatively recent.

### The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders and governors have learned from the experiences of the academy's first year and have acted effectively to target weaknesses in middle leadership, teaching, the curriculum and students' learning and progress. They have shown resolve in managing the acute staffing difficulties and have significantly strengthened the teaching compliment with specialist staff and subject leaders. These measures have satisfactorily strengthened the academy's capacity to sustain further improvement.

Strategy and direction are firmly focused on raising standards and improving the quality of learning and rates of and progress. Targets are challenging and are suitably based on high aspirations are ambition both for students and the community. Collectively, senior leaders and governors share an accurate analysis of the academy's strengths and weaknesses and a realistic appraisal of the challenges it faces. Strategic and operational plans are targeted where improvement is required the most. Quality assurance systems are well developed and ensure that accountability is matched to criteria by which the academy's progress can be measured. These factors are underpinning the improvements now evident in students' better progress though much remains to be accomplished.

Senior and middle leaders have instigated a range of strategies to improve teaching and learning. These stem from a pragmatic analysis of strengths and weaknesses in current practice. An extensive, coherent programme of professional development targets the major areas for improvement and is complemented by, for example, coaching. In parallel with this, specific training is supporting middle leaders to improve teaching and learning in their own departments, although the impact of this work remains variable. Some subject leaders are driving improvement well by focusing teacher colleagues on improving students' learning thus providing a secure platform from which teachers can develop their practice. However, this awareness is not evident in the written feedback provided by others and is a limiting factor in the effectiveness and development of individual teaching staff. Safeguarding procedures meet statutory requirements and are routinely maintained.

### External support

Academy staff work effectively with neighbouring primary and secondary schools and the local college to strengthen the quality of provision and ensure students have access to a range of suitable courses. Strong collaborative practices within the federation are benefiting the academy's development with well judged challenge and support from the chief executive of the federation and the chair of governors. The

academy enjoys good support from the school improvement partner (SIP) and from training provided by the specialist schools and academies trust (SSAT).

### Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

### Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards and improve the rate of students' learning and progress in all subjects and particularly in English and mathematics.
- Substantially increase the proportion of good or better teaching so that this becomes the norm.
- Ensure that all teachers use assessment information effectively when lessons are being planned so that activities meet the learning needs of all students in all subjects.
- Improve the consistency by which middle leaders monitor and evaluate classroom practice so that the focus is directly on improving the quality of learning.

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. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tom Grieveson  
Her Majesty's Inspector