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Mr M Gernon  
Principal  
RSA Academy  
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Dear Mr Gernon

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to the RSA Academy

## Introduction

Following my visit with Sue Morris-King HMI, to your academy on 30 and 31 March 2010, 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 monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

## Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, nominated staff, groups of students and parents. They also met with governors and a representative of the sponsors, joined two conference calls with other governors, and met with colleagues from the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

## Context

The Academy opened in September 2008 following the closure of Willingsworth High School, the predecessor school. Most members of the leadership team were new appointments and all post holders across the Academy were appointed to new/revised posts within the Academy structure; 60% of the staff transferred from the predecessor school.

The academy is larger than the average secondary school and draws students from the Tipton area of Sandwell. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is well above the national average. The percentage of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is a third of the national figure, and the proportion of those whose first language is not English is very low. The proportion of girls and boys in different year groups has varied in recent years.

The proportion of students registered by the academy as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is marginally above the national figure, although the proportion of students with a statement of special educational need is less than half the national average. Student mobility is lower than the national average and there is a small number of children who are looked after by the local authority. The academy has specialisms in health and citizenship and is sponsored by the RSA (The Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce). It has received the following national accreditations: Investor in People (Bronze) and is part of the Microsoft Academy Programme.

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

The academy recorded its first examination results in 2009 although these outcomes were heavily influenced by provision initiated in the predecessor school. This set of data records some improvement; most notable is the proportion of students securing five or more A\*-C grades at GCSE, 72%, a figure just above the national average. Similarly, students' average total points score was above the national figure. Science recorded the most significant improvement, with the percentage of students gaining GCSE grades A\*-C, 83%, significantly above the national average.

However, outcomes in English and mathematics remained well below the national average and the proportion of students who gained five or more higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics, remained below the national challenge benchmark. The 2009 value added data contain several indicators of students' progress and most of these were below national averages including those for boys and students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The indicator for progress in mathematics was particularly low in 2009 but progress has improved in the last three terms.

The academy is developing an extensive evidence base derived from internally moderated assessments, supported in some areas by standardised tests and in some subjects the GCSE and BTEC results already secured as part of an early entry programme. The academy believes that the data indicate examination outcomes will be notably stronger in 2010. The results of early entry English and mathematics GCSE examinations already secured confirm that the proportion of students likely to secure higher grade GCSE passes in these key subject will improve in 2010. Learning and progress were found to be good in 12 of the 24 lessons seen by inspectors.

## Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance has improved significantly from well below the national average at the predecessor school to a position currently above average. A significant proportion of students now achieve 100% attendance each term. Students commented that the extended academy day was, 'at first, a bit of a reality check' but when combined with the three-hour lessons these factors have helped them to see the importance of attending regularly. They were also clear that they are now far more inclined to attend well because they really enjoy their learning and feel safe. However, the proportion of students whose attendance is below 80% is still above average although, impressively, the rigorous approach that the academy has taken in challenging poor attendance and supporting vulnerable students has reduced this proportion to a quarter of the previous level.

Students' behaviour is largely good. Students have developed positive attitudes towards their education. Many students who were previously disengaged from learning now enjoy their lessons. As one student commented, 'before it was OK not to work. Now in lessons, everyone works, so you do too.' Occasionally in lessons, where the work is either not suitably challenging or is too difficult, students lose concentration and this can result in low level disruption or inappropriate behaviour. Students move around the school sensibly and have developed a good awareness of the needs of others. Bullying has reduced significantly and students feel confident that they can easily seek support from staff or peers if any occurs. Exclusions have declined; although the academy has rightly identified the need to reduce them further, particularly for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

## The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors observed 24 lessons selected by the academy. Although the staff teach two lessons daily, each of three hours, academy senior managers monitor provision in 30 minute segments and inspectors followed this pattern. Teaching and learning were good or better in half the lessons visited; outstanding and inadequate provision was also observed.

In an outstanding Year 9 poetry lesson the task was finely matched to the students' learning needs, high quality resources were provided and a challenging refinement to the task tempted a number of students to take responsibility for their own learning. Similarly, in an outstanding Year 13 psychology lesson the quality of students' prior learning was evident in their high level responses to incisive questioning. The teacher's ability to refine the level of challenge and guide the students' responses was a key factor in the success of the lesson.

Where teaching and learning were good, teachers often showed good subject knowledge; high quality questions required students to reflect upon their own learning in order to provide accurate responses. Such sessions were well managed,

often providing a drip feed of challenging ideas and tasks. Satisfactory lessons occupied rather than challenged passive students. In some instances, the nature of the task lacked sufficient challenge or the quality of questions failed to take advantage of students' insightful responses. Where lessons were judged to generate only satisfactory learning it was because either the use of time was barely effective or because planning did not always provide student centred activities with a strong match to their learning needs.

The house system and vertical tutoring structure, in which students belong to mixed-age tutor groups, has been successful in making students feel they belong to the whole academy and not just to a year group. Through this structure, students receive support and guidance, both academically and socially. Students attribute many of the improvements in their behaviour to this new system. As one older student commented, 'before, if you were in trouble, people in your own year used to egg you on. Now you have to be a role model to younger pupils.' Students emphasised how much more 'safe and secure' this peer support has made them feel. The academy has put in place a range of suitable structures to provide students who need it with additional support. These have had a clear impact on improving attendance, reducing exclusions, and improving the learning of some vulnerable students. Opportunities for individuals to attend 'booster' or 'catch up' sessions twice a week if they have missed any learning are an important factor in keeping students engaged and confident.

After some initial difficulties with staffing, the academy now has in place a permanent team of leaders, teachers and support staff to develop provision for the inclusion of students with additional needs, particularly those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The leaders of this aspect are analytical and have given careful thought to the next stages of development. Students' needs are being carefully identified and their progress tracked, both by the inclusion team and by senior leaders. The range of additional provision to support students with specific needs is gradually expanding. Crucially, senior leaders understand the need to ensure that students' special educational needs are met in each lesson and not only through additional provision.

The academy's leaders have put considerable energy and vision into developing the curriculum. The RSA opening minds curriculum is giving students a new way of working that is extending their learning skills and motivating them to explore new academic interests. The 'competencies' approach is well understood by teachers and students and is used with growing consistency and confidence.

Students are excited by the wide range of options they can begin from Year 9 onwards, which combine traditional GCSE courses with more practical/ vocational courses. Effective guidance is given to students to help them to make these important choices, including a range of popular 'taster' sessions. Importantly, students will have a second opportunity to expand or add to their qualifications

during Year 11. Work experience is carefully linked to the curriculum and to students' individual aspirations. The academy has rightly identified that the range of courses offered to students aged 13 to 19 needs further expansion to be truly inclusive and has begun this work.

### The effectiveness of leadership and management

A well-organised and efficiently managed leadership team has secured the smooth transfer from the predecessor school, significantly enhanced provision and won the hearts and minds of the large majority of students and parents. The 'opening minds' concept of the sponsors is closely aligned with the academy specialisms in citizenship and health; this is a key feature of teachers' lesson planning and at the core of all aspects of the academy's development. Senior staff were invited to join inspectors in the joint observation of teaching and learning. The views expressed by senior colleagues during a formal review of this exercise broadly concurred with the judgements given by inspectors. Where there were differences, a sharper evaluation by leaders and managers of the quality of learning and progress actually taking place in the lesson was required.

The leadership team is both hard working and reflective, demonstrating an increasing ability to bring pedagogical insights to the enhancement of provision. Leaders have realised the key to securing the success of the 'opening minds' concept in Years 7 to 13 is through blending complementary curriculum initiatives such as the introduction of the international baccalaureate post-16 courses, vocational provision and traditional GCSE courses to raise standards and levels of achievement. In order to ensure that students have the key literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology skills required for examination success, executive leaders and governors have created additional leadership capacity by securing the secondment of a mathematics specialist from Warwick University and an information technology specialist from a commercial partner. The impressive improvements secured in attendance, behaviour and attitudes to learning have been important successes.

The governing body is particularly well informed and governors' analytical focus on raising standards and achievement is very clear. The drive displayed by leaders and governors to ensure that a very large majority of groups of pupils make at least good progress, with clear evidence of this, will be the key to a successful school inspection at some point in 2011. The academy's capacity to improve further is outstanding.

### External support

External support from the sponsors has secured wonderful new facilities on-site, due to open in August 2010. Parents expressed a sense of awe that 'somebody should provide such facilities for their children and their community'. External partners have

contributed expertise to these developments at many levels. The academy's school improvement partner has offered a useful external analysis of development.

### Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

### Priorities for further improvement

- The academy has identified that ensuring students have the key skills and subject knowledge required for examination success as they move to the next stage of their education will be crucial to both the students' and the academy's future progress; inspectors concur with this view.

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

*David Jones*

Her Majesty's Inspector

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