

Serco Inspections  
Boundary House  
2 Wythall Green Way  
Middle Lane  
Birmingham  
B47 6LW

T 0300 123 1231  
Text Phone: 0161 6188524  
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

**Direct T** 0845 123 6001  
**Direct F** 9845 123 6002  
**Direct email:** inspections.team@serco.com

25 November 2010

Mr Jonathan Johnson  
Principal  
Aylesbury Vale Academy  
Weedon Road  
Aylesbury  
Buckinghamshire  
HP19 9PG

Dear Mr Johnson

## **Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Aylesbury Vale Academy**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with Andrew Harrett HMI to your academy on 23 and 24 November 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection 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 other senior staff, middle leaders, groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body, who was also representing the sponsors, and a parent governor. An inspector also met with the headteacher of a pupil referral unit which works closely with the academy. Telephone discussions were conducted with the headteacher of the school working as a change partner and supporting the work of the academy as well as the school improvement partner who is also the national challenge adviser. The inspection team did not focus on the work of the sixth form.

### **Context**

Aylesbury Vale Academy, sponsored by the Oxford Diocesan Board of Education and Buckinghamshire County Council, opened in September 2009 following the closure of Quarrendon School. The academy is using the same buildings as its predecessor

school and originally plans were in place for a new building on a nearby site by 2012. However, since the election of the coalition government these plans are now being reviewed and a final decision on the scale and extent of the building work is expected in December. This uncertainty is a considerable concern to governors and staff as an increasing roll is already creating additional pressure on the accommodation, particularly for specialist subjects. The academy provides education for students in Years 7 to 11 together with a small, but growing, sixth form. It also provides a range of extended services for the students, their parents and the local community. The academy's specialist subjects are science, design technology and information and communication technology (ICT). This latter subject plays an important role in enhancing the learning in subjects across the academy. Its stated vision is to ensure that every student will leave suitably skilled and qualified to gain a place in further or higher education or to take a place in full time employment. The academy has achieved the Bronze International School award.

There are currently 832 students on roll including 87 in the post-16 college. Around two-fifths of students are from minority ethnic groups, which is well above average. The largest group is of Pakistani origin and about 30% of students do not speak English as their first language. Almost a quarter of students have been identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. This proportion is above that found nationally. The large majority have moderate learning or behavioural, social or emotional difficulties. The proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is about average. Three students are looked after by the local authority and 20 are young carers. The academy serves a community where there are pockets of socio-economic disadvantage, and the proportion of students entitled to free school meals is above average.

Most of the staff from the predecessor school transferred to the academy when it opened. However, the first year of operation proved to be a turbulent period with regard to staffing caused by long term sickness absence and difficulty in the recruitment to specific posts. Since September 2010 the academy has a full complement of staff which includes 16 newly qualified teachers. Part of the success of the recruitment campaign has been the imaginative use of a range of benefits including health insurance and subsidised housing.

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

The impact of the academy's strategies and provision currently present a mixed picture. In 2010 the proportion of Year 11 students achieving five higher GCSE grades including English and mathematics had improved compared to the last results from the predecessor school but fell just short of the target set and remain low. Substantial gains were made in the proportion of those achieving five GCSE higher grades overall reflecting a developing range of examination options available for students. The proportion gaining the highest grades also increased, exceeding the target set. Focused work with students identified as underachieving in English led to

a sharp improvement in the proportion of those achieving a higher GCSE grade. However, there was a decline in the percentage of students gaining this grade in mathematics. A new mathematics curriculum leader joined the academy in September has already implemented plans to target underachievement in the subject.

The impact of the academy's specialist subjects is variable. The 2010 examination results show the proportion of students gaining higher level GCSE grades in science was low. In design technology, there was a strong performance in graphic products but resistant materials and textiles were weaker. The targets set were only met in graphics and ICT of the six specialist subjects and aspects. There were some strong performances in subjects such as English literature, religious studies and sports studies. However, in other subjects such as French, geography and citizenship outcomes were not as positive. The academy has worked on the development of a comprehensive cycle of progress tracking and data from this system indicates that standards are beginning to rise. Current data for Year 11 indicates that students are on track to exceed the target set for the proportion achieving five or more higher grades including English and mathematics.

Taking their starting points into consideration, the majority of students made satisfactory progress during the academy's first year. This includes students with special needs and those with statements of special educational needs made above average progress in English. Some minority ethnic groups made lower than expected progress although students with a Pakistani background made above average progress in mathematics.

In lessons inspectors observed a mixed picture of learning and progress across the academy and in the students' work. However, taken overall, this represents an improving profile. This is exemplified in students' greater enjoyment, engagement and improved attitudes to learning. In some lessons, such as a German lesson with Year 7 students, there was a high degree of enthusiasm with excellent challenge and application of learning. However, in other lessons, students were not learning as effectively as they could because there was a lack of focus on their individual needs.

### **Other relevant pupil outcomes**

Attendance is improving strongly and current data for the academic year to date shows the overall figure to be above average. The rates for persistent absence have fallen considerably. Punctuality is generally good and reinforced consistently by staff. This has been achieved by the uniform approach adopted by the academy and is part of its promotion of Christian values, particularly respect and self discipline. The range of strategies bringing about this improvement in attendance include working with families to identify barriers to regular attendance and providing personalised plans to support individuals as well as the provision of flexible curriculum options to meet specific needs. The academy promotes the importance of regular attendance

to parents consistently emphasising that unjustified absence 'steals' education. The academy has worked with the local authority to prosecute families of persistent non-attenders when necessary. There is clear data on the trends in absence across the academy in terms of classes and year groups but this is not yet fully analysed.

The academy supports students to develop their confidence as learners and reinforces the importance of respect for others as part of community. Students appreciate the opportunities they have to play a part in the development of the academy through the college councils and the associate governing body and can point to actions taken by the academy following requests from these groups. An example of this is the implementation of the scheme for positive behaviour points. Older students have leadership roles within the academy and undertake these responsibly. They say that the vertical tutor groups with students from all years helps to develop an understanding of the importance of working in a community and supporting each other, regardless of age. This is further emphasised by the strong college ethos developed by membership of one of the three colleges within the academy. As a result behaviour is improving and this was commented upon by students and staff alike. During the 2009/10 year the number of exclusions increased compared to the previous year as the academy worked to establish a clear set of standards. However, the current data shows that the number of exclusions is half of that during the same period last year.

Inspectors saw both good and exemplary behaviour in lessons, during an assembly and around the academy. Students are polite, articulate and prepared to share their views. Behaviour was less positive in lessons which lacked pace or where students' needs were not being met effectively or where expectations for appropriate attitudes were not clear.

### **The effectiveness of provision**

The standard of teaching has improved since the academy opened despite the staffing issues that prevailed last year. This was the result of work on the improvement of teaching and learning managed by the vice principal, using consultant support. This has been developed this year to provide structured support for newly qualified teachers at the academy. All new teachers who spoke to inspectors appreciated the induction programme and mentor support provided, particularly for the development of their teaching skills. Despite some examples of lessons which were good or outstanding, around half were satisfactory. This is in line with the academy's own self evaluation and consequently the high priority to secure improvement in teaching and learning in order to drive up standards and improve progress is correct. In the best lessons there was a brisk pace to learning, teachers displayed good relationships and were skilled in asking questions to challenge students' thinking. Expectations of students' behaviour and level of work and engagement were high. In some lessons, learning lost momentum for students because there was not enough focus by staff on individual needs and this was

reflected in the planning. The quality of teachers' marking is very variable. There was very little evidence of written comments which guide students on how to improve and where marking is inconsistent standards of presentation suffers. Students are aware of the variable quality of the marking in their books.

The curriculum is being developed as the academy works to ensure that the needs of students are met. For example, cross curricular literacy is supported by the Accelerated Reader Programme and there is a group of able Year 9 students who have successfully advanced to Year 10. Actions such as these reflect the 'stages not ages' philosophy for learning at the academy. Further developments include a two year programme for Key Stage 3 which will enable more time to work towards examination options in Years 10 and 11. In Key Stage 4 there is a developing range of options, including various examination and vocational opportunities. In this provision the academy is working with various partners including the local further education college and local schools. This varied provision and partnership work is also found in the post-16 college. The academy is actively developing the introduction of the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme to create more personalisation, emphasis transferable skills and to encourage independent learning. Overall, the flexibility of the curriculum is effective in meeting the needs of individuals and groups, improving behaviour and attendance. However, the provision and outcomes for the specialist subjects have been affected by staffing difficulties and pressure on accommodation, particularly for design technology.

Appropriately, the academy gives high priority to providing personalised care for students and particularly those who are identified as vulnerable in any way. It can provide a range of case studies where vulnerable students have been supported well. Students feel safe and secure and know they can share concerns with adults, particularly the learning support staff. Safeguarding procedures are effective and implemented rigorously. The academy has high quality information on students and is proactive in developing appropriate support programmes for those who need it.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers**

The academy faced some challenges during the first year of operation which required resilience and fortitude to resolve. The Principal has brought effective leadership, vision and a commitment to improve the achievement of students in a caring community. In this he is well supported by the Vice Principal. Both have the advantage of a good understanding of the predecessor school and the community the academy serves. Despite a difficult first year, the academy has a well structured senior leadership team and middle managers are becoming more effective as the quality of data on student progress improves and systems for targeting underachievement are embedded. There are clear lines of accountability with a focus on the improvements in students' achievement.

Leaders work well to ensure that strategic planning and day-to-day management of the academy are smooth and effective. This strategic planning is based on rigorous and accurate self-evaluation based on a comprehensive range of performance data. The views of parents and students are also canvassed regularly. Resources are well managed, especially those relating to accommodation. Staff at all levels display a commitment to improve the lives of the students and they, in turn, generally respond positively and relationships are good. In this aspect the Principal plays a leading role by ensuring that he knows the students and their families well. The academy does not underestimate the scale of the challenge to reach the targets which it has set itself, but staff display a determination to succeed.

There are clear lines of accountability between academy staff and the governing body. The governors' scrutiny committee meets six times each year and reviews the progress and achievement of students. Senior and middle leaders, as well as the Principal, report directly to the committee and action plans are developed, and subsequently monitored, as a result of the meetings. Governors are well led and members have a wide range of skills to support and challenge staff. Taking into account the systems in place to improve achievement, strong structures for accountability and full staffing levels the academy has good capacity to improve.

### **External support**

The academy benefits well from the support from the school improvement partner who is also the National Challenge adviser. The Principal appreciates the advice offered as well as the robust challenge. The academy has been successful in using support from organisations with a sharp focus on its own development plan ensuring that support packages are tailored to an identified improvement priority. Middle leaders have been well supported through a programme offered by the Specialist Schools' and Academies Trust. The academy is outward-looking and contributes to a range of partnerships locally, for example the pupil referral unit located nearby which has enabled vulnerable students to receive appropriate provision and maintain attendance.

### **Main Judgements**

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- Raise achievement in the specialist subjects and mathematics in order to meet or exceed the academy's targets.
- Develop and reinforce clear procedures and expectations for the marking of students' work so that it regularly establishes what has been achieved and how it can be improved.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Group at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Robert Pyner  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**