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20 January 2012

Mrs Claire Smith  
Principal  
Bedford Academy  
Mile Road  
Bedford  
MK42 9TR

Dear Mrs Smith

## **Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Bedford Academy**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with Martin Cragg, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 18–19 January 2012, 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 members of staff, groups of students and the Chair of the Governing Body along with another member of the governing body, who both also represent the sponsors.

### **Context**

The academy opened in the buildings of the predecessor school in September 2010. It will move to a new building in October 2012. Construction is on schedule. Of the seven members of the senior leadership team, two transferred from the predecessor school. All the heads of subject, with one exception, are new to the academy. Although about 80% of the staff transferred from the predecessor school, 70% of these have subsequently left. There has been a 100% turnover of staff in the science department since the academy opened. There have been some challenges in appointing permanent teachers in English, mathematics and science. The number of students on roll is increasing and is currently 665. There is a relatively high number

of students joining after the usual time of September, many of whom are from overseas. About 40% of students are White British. The majority of ethnic minority students are from Bangladesh or Poland. About one third of students speak English as an additional language and about 4% are disabled or have special educational needs. More than 30% of students are known to be eligible for free school meals.

### **Pupils' achievement**

In the public examinations taken at the end of Year 11 in 2011, the proportion of students that achieved five or more higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics, exceeded that of the previous year. However, the proportion remained below the government's minimum expectation and the progress made by students was below average. Taking the best eight results of all students into account, there was an apparent reduction in standards overall. However, this was a result of a move towards a greater emphasis on GCSE examinations and away from vocational qualifications. The difference in the performance of different groups of students is generally less than that found nationally. Some groups, such as those who are known to be eligible for free school meals and those who speak English as an additional language, perform as well as their peers. The academy's targets are ambitious and well judged, and provide a strong drive for improvement.

More recent data show that students are now making better progress in their learning, though the standards they are reaching are still below national averages. For example, the current Year 11 students have taken their English and mathematics GCSE examinations early, with two terms less teaching than is usual. In both subjects, the results were better than at the same time one year ago, and substantially so in mathematics. In English, the proportion achieving a higher grade was about one third of the cohort. In mathematics, about half did so, exceeding the proportion reached at the end of Year 11 by the previous year group.

In lessons, the quality of learning and the progress made by students varies from outstanding to inadequate. It is good in a large majority of lessons. Disabled students and those with special educational needs are making good progress. Students' progress is tracked frequently and in detail. The evidence suggests that these data are accurate and are used effectively to identify what interventions are needed to improve individuals' progress. The academy is committed to developing the sixth form, which is currently smaller than most. Relatively few students took GCE A-level qualifications in 2011 but a larger number took AS courses. Overall, students' attainment varies from below average to average, with AS-level results the strongest. Students entered the sixth form with below national average attainment and in 2011 they achieved progress in line with students nationally with the better progress being achieved in AS subjects.

### **Other relevant pupil outcomes**

Students' behaviour across the academy is improving because the staff have made their expectations for good behaviour clear and have introduced a revised behaviour policy. Since the academy opened, the number of exclusions has fallen steadily each term. The reasons for exclusion have also changed, with fewer for serious incidents and more for students refusing to comply with the behaviour code. Nevertheless, although students confirm that behaviour is improving, they also say that some lessons are interrupted by a few students failing to concentrate and, therefore, slowing learning for others. Inspectors observed this in a small number of lessons where students did not listen carefully enough or did not settle to work immediately. In these cases, teachers did not always use the academy's behaviour policy effectively. However, the great majority of students behave well and move around the academy calmly and in a sensible manner.

The academy has developed effective provision for managing students who are removed from lessons. It is well organised and ensures that students receive work set by their class teachers. Students are reintegrated into class promptly.

Since the academy opened, students' attendance has improved and it is now above average. Staff emphasise how important it is in ensuring high achievement and they monitor any concerns thoroughly. Students appreciate the clarity of the 'attendance colour' process. They also value the rewards that are attached to high attendance. The work done with individuals whose absence patterns cause concern is effective and this has reduced the proportion of students who are persistently absent to below the national average.

A recent survey of students' views indicates that almost all feel safe within the academy. Students appreciate the support provided by adults in the form of mentoring and responding to their concerns. They say that bullying is rare and that it is dealt with effectively by staff when reported.

### **The effectiveness of provision**

The quality of teaching is improving well. In the best lessons, there is a good pace of learning, with a good range of motivating activities in which students take responsibility for their own learning. The teachers' expectations of students are high and appropriate to their potential. In a good mathematics lesson in Year 9, the pace of learning was impressive; assessment was used well to check students' understanding which enabled the teacher to respond where there were difficulties. There were frequent changes of activity and the work culminated in a challenging piece of problem solving. In weaker lessons, the activities do not engage students sufficiently. As a result, their interest wanes and they can become disengaged.

There is a range of strategies used to support the learning of disabled students and those with special educational needs. These are increasingly effective. The deployment of teaching assistants has been rationalised so that, for example,

wherever possible they support successive lessons a class has in the same subject and so know more precisely what sort of help different students will need. Specialist subject support for students is also available in each department.

In 2011, Year 11 students who speak English as an additional language made generally stronger progress than their peers. The academy has developed an effective process for evaluating students' language skills on arrival. They are carefully screened and the information is used to allocate them to sets. In lessons, teachers show variable skills in helping students less confident in English to access learning. In the best examples, teachers provide text in the more common home languages or ensure that students have access to dictionaries using their home language. They structure questions carefully and use vocabulary which helps students to understand more easily. However, in other lessons, teachers miss opportunities to reinforce key aspects of language such as grammar and idiom, or use vocabulary which is well beyond the capacity of the students. Staff track students' progress closely and intervene where performance or behaviour cause concern.

From the lessons observed, teaching in the sixth form is often good. Teachers have good subject knowledge and their high expectations challenges students. In the best lessons, they ensured that students thought for themselves, using effective questions to extend their ideas and prompt explanations. Students show mature attitudes to learning and respond well to this challenge. However, teachers do not always check students' understanding regularly enough and, occasionally, they do not ensure that all students participate in discussion.

The curriculum has been developed continuously since the academy opened to ensure that it caters well for students' differing needs. More time is now dedicated to English and mathematics teaching and this is beginning to have an impact on achievement in these subjects. Students now have better access to GCSE courses in humanities, modern foreign languages and other more academic subjects. At the same time, vocational courses are taught at local colleges to take advantage of specialist teachers and equipment. The academy has ensured that specific programmes are available for a few students with particular needs, always ensuring that they also gain qualifications in English and mathematics. The academy recognised that a significant minority of students have relatively low levels of literacy on entry to Year 9. These students now follow a programme to improve their basic skills instead of taking a modern foreign language. Although the programme is in its early stages, there are already signs that it has improved reading skills. The academy is also adopting a literacy strategy across all subjects and has begun to train staff accordingly. This initiative is well focused but it is too soon to gauge its impact on literacy levels.

The curriculum provides a sound range of choice for students, given the academy's size. The academy is conscious of the need to provide relevant courses which allow

students to progress from Year 11 and has increased the range of Level 2 options available. Staff monitor students' progress and attendance closely and identify any who require additional support. Senior staff have developed a clear strategic vision for the sixth form, focused on meeting students' needs more effectively and expanding the range and quality of provision.

The academy has begun to use its specialism in science and technology to raise the profile of these subjects. Thematic events last summer promoted science experiments. Some students act as 'science ambassadors' in local schools. The specialist subjects have not yet contributed to improving teaching across the academy by modelling effective approaches.

### **The effectiveness of leadership and management**

The governing body takes a very strong role in strategic decision-making and in monitoring and evaluating the progress the academy is making towards raising achievement. Its members are very well informed and provide a high degree of challenge and support.

Self-evaluation is accurate and the academy's improvement plan is well focussed on the academy's central aim of raising students' attainment. To that end, there is a particular focus in the academy of improving students' attendance, punctuality, behaviour and the quality of teaching they receive.

Teaching is improving as a result of a well-considered and thorough strategy that includes mentoring and coaching as well as frequent monitoring and evaluation of the progress being made. As with the successful work in improving attendance, punctuality and behaviour, the approach to improving teaching involves a good range of members of staff in driving forward the improvements. This is a strength of the leadership approach and there are good systems of accountability. Those leaders with responsibility for subject departments have a good understanding of the characteristics of teaching in their area and are well involved in its improvement in, for example, providing subject-specific advice. A good series of initiatives is being undertaken to increase parental involvement in children's education. These demonstrate the academy's clear capacity for improvement.

The academy ensures that it meets the basic requirements for keeping students safe. Staff receive regular training on identifying and reporting any concerns. Students' safety has been prioritised during the current building work on the site. Staff review risks in lessons and ensure that key safety requirements are met, for example in physical education and science.

## **External support**

There are increasingly effective partnerships with local colleges which have broadened the range and quality of vocational courses available to students. There is some collaboration with other schools for sixth-form subjects which enable a small number of students to follow their first choice without having to change schools. The academy has worked hard to build up links with its local partner schools on the curriculum and other areas. There are effective relationships with external agencies and services which support students whose circumstances may put them at risk.

## **Main Judgements**

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

## **Priorities for further improvement**

- Ensure that, in all lessons, students are provided with a range of motivating activities that provide an appropriate level of challenge and which encourage them to concentrate on their learning and to work at a good pace.

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

Yours sincerely

Alan Alder

**Her Majesty's Inspector**

cc Mervyn Weeden Chair of the Governing Body  
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