

Serco Inspections
Cedar House
21 William Street
Edgbaston
Birmingham
B15 1LH

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Serco
Direct T 0121 683 3888

25 January 2012

Mrs C Spillane
Principal
The Thetford Academy
Staniforth Road
Thetford
IP24 3LH

Dear Mrs Spillane

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Thetford Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Lindsay Hebditch, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 23–24 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 consultant Principal, senior leaders, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Board and two groups of students.

Context

The Thetford Academy opened in September 2010 in existing buildings on two sites approximately three miles apart. All staff transferred to the academy from the two predecessor schools. Its main sponsor is Easton College. Other sponsors include West Suffolk College, Wymondham College and Norfolk County Council. Plans to rebuild the academy on one site are due for completion in 2013. The large majority of students are White British. A larger than average proportion of students is from European backgrounds. The percentage known to be eligible for free school meals is similar to the national average. The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs is above average. Of these, most have moderate learning or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

The accelerated opening of the academy did not begin well. Parents, carers and students were resistant to the move to a single secondary provision in the town. This was compounded by poor leadership and management within the academy, a lack of consistent policy and practices across the two sites, poor quality teaching and learning and the absence of a clear educational vision. An external review in December 2010 confirmed these significant weaknesses. Consequently, the lead sponsor changed, a new Principal was appointed and a new leadership team formed. A large number of staff left the academy at the end of July 2011.

Pupils' achievement

Against this backdrop, the results attained by students at the end of Key Stage 4 were low. The percentage achieving at least five A* to C grades including English and mathematics was below the government's floor standards. Since then, senior leaders have taken steps to improve the quality of students' learning and progress so that those in Year 11 are fully prepared for the 2012 examinations. Weekly meetings focusing on raising students' achievement are held to evaluate performance data and to target additional support towards those who need it most. These procedures are firmly established for students in Year 11 and, to a lesser extent, in Year 10, but do not extend into Key Stage 3.

Current data shows that a higher proportion of Year 11 students are achieving well and at least 45% of them are on-track to attain five GCSEs including English and mathematics. Additional one-to one support and intensive pastoral care is also targeted towards the small proportion of students on the borderline of meeting this important threshold. Results show that students' achievement across subjects ranges from very high to too low, reflecting the variable quality of teaching they receive. For example, last year the percentage achieving at least a grade C was high in drama, art and some vocational awards but low in science, humanities and aspects of design technology.

In most English and mathematics lessons, students feel they are making progress because the quality of teaching has improved. Lesson observations and discussions with students confirmed this. For example, in an English lesson Year 11 students made good progress when the teacher enabled them to work collaboratively in groups to illustrate the best ways of answering examination questions and share their findings with others to help them learn. In mathematics, suitably challenging tasks and clear explanations by the teacher helped students to reinforce their understanding of how to factorise equations. Students report that teachers are expecting more from them. They value the increased range of interventions provided to help them catch up on coursework and prepare for examinations later this year. Younger students are also benefitting from better quality teaching but a significant proportion of them, particularly less-able and those learning English as an additional

language, show notable shortfalls in their basic literacy and numeracy skills which are not being addressed in a systematic manner.

In the sixth form, weak teaching and the absence of a broad range of suitable vocational options led to some underachievement last year. A significant proportion of students did not continue their studies into Year 13. A new head of sixth form is beginning to improve the tracking of students' progress and monitor their personal welfare more closely. Inspectors noted the impact of better teaching and increased support for students on their growing confidence and improved progress, but also found that students have insufficient opportunities to pursue vocational learning.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The difficulties experienced by the academy in its first year led to a deterioration in students' behaviour and a high number of exclusions. Students say that, currently, a small minority of students disrupt lessons but feel that this has improved because most teachers are managing it better than before. Inspectors noted some misbehaviour but found that, in most lessons and around the academy, the majority of students behave well and display positive attitudes. Better monitoring and increased liaison with parents and carers is leading to modest improvements in attendance, but this remains much lower than the national average. High persistent absence rates in Year 11 present a significant barrier to raising overall achievement.

The effectiveness of provision

In most lessons, students are responding well to improved teaching. Systematic lesson monitoring is providing a clearer picture of where the strengths and weaknesses lie, and the impact recent staff training has had. The most effective teaching is characterised by teachers' high expectations and strong relationships with students. Teachers set clear timescales and expect students to meet them. Students are challenged to give detailed responses to teachers' questions and to think for themselves. Teaching assistants are effectively deployed to teach individuals or small groups rather than simply supervise them. Improved planning includes more opportunities for students to work independently in small groups for sustained periods of time. However, these good features are evident in a minority of lessons. Although more-able students are receiving an increased level of challenge and support, the needs of some average and lower-ability students, including disabled students and those with special educational needs, are not met in all lessons.

A scrutiny of students' books reveals some of the weaknesses in teaching. Work is often poorly presented or left unfinished. Spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors are not always corrected, so some students continue to make the same common mistakes and the quality of their writing does not improve. Recent changes made to the curriculum are welcomed by students who found the previous model

confusing and some of their lessons too long. Senior leaders acknowledge that more changes are needed to widen choice, particularly for those students wishing to pursue vocational awards. Discrete literacy lessons are having some impact in reinforcing basic skills, but this is not enough to overcome the legacy of underachievement noticeable among a large proportion of students in Key Stage 3.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The Principal's determined and resolute leadership is putting the academy back on track. She has challenged endemic weaknesses in teaching and galvanised the commitment of staff to put the needs of students first and foremost. A team of newly appointed Vice-Principals have made an immediate impact with staff and students. All of them are being held to account for delivering further prompt improvements. The governing board has been instrumental in challenging much of the unacceptable practice that undermined the academy's progress last year. Together, governing body members and senior leaders, are demonstrating the academy has the capacity to improve.

Self-evaluation is honest and largely accurate. Observations carried out jointly with inspectors confirmed the rigour of senior leaders' monitoring but more needs to be done to promote good quality teaching and to eradicate a residue of inadequate teaching. There are clear plans for improvement and staff are being held accountable for the attainment of their students. Faculty leaders have assumed a stronger role in monitoring the effectiveness of the academy. This is adding further capacity to improve but, currently, there is no overall leader of mathematics. Students are kept safe and the single central record is regularly maintained.

External support

The governing board has engaged the services of an experienced leader on a temporary basis to mentor the new Principal as the academy establishes itself. This is helping to introduce and develop improved data management and monitoring procedures. An external consultant has also been commissioned to manage the academy's building project to enable the Principal to focus on raising achievement. Intensive external scrutiny from the local authority and the Department for Education is providing senior leaders with regular support and challenge to raise achievement further.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress. Some concerns remain but the academy's leaders and managers are demonstrating the capacity to address these weaknesses.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of teaching so that most is judged to be good or better by:
 - implementing an agreed policy to mark students' work and correct basic errors in their literacy
 - systematically checking books to gauge the impact marking has on students' achievement
 - sharing good practice in the use of teacher's questioning and the deployment of teaching assistants to support less-able students.

- Raise the achievement of all students by:
 - extending the newly introduced procedures to monitor progress using performance data throughout all key stages, including the sixth form
 - improving basic literacy and numeracy skills in additional discrete lessons and across all subjects
 - increasing attendance so that it is much closer to the national average.

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

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc David Lawrence Chair of the Governing Body
The Academies Advisers Unit, DfE [colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk]