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2 February 2012

Mr David Terry  
Principal  
The Sutton Academy  
Elton Head Road  
St Helens  
Merseyside  
WA9 5AU

Dear Mr Terry

## **Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Sutton Academy**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit with Sally Kenyon HMI and Jacqueline Rothery to your academy on 31 January 2012 to 1 February 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, groups of pupils, groups of staff and a representative of the governing body and sponsors.

### **Context**

The Sutton Academy, which is larger than most secondary schools, opened in September 2010. It operates on the site of the school it replaced. In 2013, the academy is due to have use of a partial new build with additional remodelled and refurbished areas. The academy is sponsored by St Helens College and Edge Hill University and has a main specialism in science, with additional specialisms in sport and enterprise.

Almost all students are of White British heritage. Just over one quarter of the students are known to be eligible for free school meals, which is well above average. The proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs is above average; similarly, the proportion with a statement is above average.

The former school had several changes of headteacher in its last four years. The current Principal has been in post since being appointed Principal Designate in April 2010. When the academy opened, almost all staff appointed previously worked at the former school. In its first year, the academy exceeded the government's floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for attainment and progress.

### **Pupils' achievement**

Achievement is satisfactory. Attainment at GCSE in 2011 was similar to that in 2010 in the previous school. For example, the average point score for students' best eight subjects was almost identical in the two years and in line with the national average. Attainment in English and mathematics remains below average. 2011 results in English were similar to 2010, but results in mathematics dropped.

Students, including those with disabilities and those with special educational needs, continue to make satisfactory progress relative to their starting points, both in lessons and over time. However, 2011 GCSE results showed that too few students made the expected progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 in mathematics and in humanities subjects. While the progress of higher-ability and middle-ability students was in line with national figures, the progress of lower-ability students was well below average. Inspection evidence, together with data supplied by the academy, indicate that the gap in progress between the different ability groups has narrowed and that progress in mathematics for current students is satisfactory. Leaders and managers have identified, rightly, that improving students' achievement in mathematics further remains a priority for the academy. The academy has evidence to show that students are on track to achieve higher GCSE results in 2012 and also that current students, particularly those in Key Stage 3, are making considerably more progress than similar students at the same time last year.

In the sixth form, attainment is below average. Students make satisfactory progress from starting points that are often below average. In 2011, the small group of students studying for the BTEC National Certificate made good progress compared with similar students in other sixth forms.

Most students show positive attitudes and respond well to the tasks they are set. They work well in groups and are willing to offer answers in class. They learn well in structured lessons and where the work set suits their level of ability. A small minority have poor attitudes to work and need considerable guidance and supervision in order to maintain concentration. The progress of some students is slowed by their low levels of literacy.

## **Other relevant pupil outcomes**

Attendance is broadly average. Attendance figures for 2010/11 were slightly lower than in the final year of the predecessor school but have shown a slight rise for the current academic year. The attendance of students known to be eligible for free school meals is low compared with other students; similarly, the attendance of students with special educational needs is lower than that of other students. The gap between these groups and other students has widened this year.

Behaviour is satisfactory. Most pupils behave well but some exhibit challenging behaviour in lessons and around the academy site. A drive to raise standards of behaviour has resulted in more students being subject to the academy's system for internal exclusions in the current year. Students agree that a small minority of students disrupt learning but feel that behaviour has improved since the academy opened.

## **The effectiveness of provision**

The quality of teaching is satisfactory. The majority of lessons seen by inspectors were good but there is some inadequate teaching. Teachers use information and communication technology well to demonstrate ideas and make it clear to students the expected learning in the lesson. Stronger teaching is characterised by good challenge, particularly for the most able, fast pace and good questioning to promote higher-level thinking. Where teaching is good, teachers use stimulating and engaging starter activities alongside creative games to facilitate assessment that supports learning; they exploit opportunities for students to engage in extended periods of independent learning. Inspectors also saw good examples of assessment, such as marking that used National Curriculum levels to identify areas for improvement.

Teaching is less effective where teachers do not plan fully for different abilities in the class: for example, sometimes, work is pitched at too low a level and does not challenge higher-ability students sufficiently. On other occasions, those in need of literacy support do not get the guidance that they need, such as with key words and writing frames. In lessons where the teacher dominates, students have few opportunities for independent learning and where marking is of lower quality, teachers do not give students specific information on how to improve their work. Teachers' application of the academy's behaviour policy is inconsistent so that, in a small number of lessons, the poor attitudes of a few students affect the pace of learning.

It is too soon to judge the impact of revisions to the curriculum on the progress of students in Years 7 to 10 as they have only been in operation since September 2011. Year 11 students are completing the curriculum they started in the predecessor

school. The academy's specialisms have a positive impact on students' attainment overall: GCSE results in science are relatively strong and, in physical education, 2011 results were above the national average. Students identify science as a strong subject within the academy and one that they enjoy.

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

The Principal and senior leaders have helped to generate higher expectations and more positive attitudes among staff. Teachers appreciate the academy's extra focus on improving the achievement of students in Key Stage 3, as well as the additional support for students preparing for examinations. Since the academy opened, the high turnover of mathematics teachers, which contributed to underachievement of recent students, has been halted. Self-evaluation is broadly accurate; leaders and managers are able to identify the academy's strengths and weaknesses and plan for improvement. Similarly, they are able to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching; however, recent internal evaluations of teaching have been overgenerous, particularly in the proportion of teaching judged outstanding. Safeguarding arrangements meet requirements.

Use of a range of external consultants has helped the staff to understand more clearly how the academy compares with other schools and what is needed to improve. Initiatives to develop teaching, such as coaching and sharing good practice, have had a positive impact on teaching styles and led to an additional focus on students' learning.

Leaders and managers recognise that current arrangements for promoting literacy and numeracy across the academy are not effective. They have started to address the issue through making additional appointments that aim to give it a higher priority. The academy places a high priority on promoting good attendance and employs staff who focus specifically on reducing the proportion of students who are persistently absent. However, leaders and managers have not focused sufficiently on monitoring attendance gaps between students in different groups.

### **External support**

The academy benefits considerably from links with its two sponsors. Over 50 students from Year 10 benefit from following vocational courses at St Helens College that would not otherwise be available. Staff from St Helens College also provide additional expertise in supporting developments at the academy. Wide-ranging links with Edge Hill University have brought considerable benefits, including support for managers and additional professional development for teachers. Extensive involvement in the university's teacher training programmes has helped to promote further the academy's focus on developing teaching and learning and strengthened links with local primary schools.

## **Main Judgements**

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

## **Priorities for further improvement**

- Improve achievement through:
  - raising the proportion of students who make at least the expected progress, so that it is closer to the national average
  - ensuring that GCSE results in mathematics reflect recent improvements.
  
- Improve teaching further through ensuring that teachers:
  - give appropriate attention to catering for the full range of abilities in the class
  - apply the academy's behaviour management policy consistently.
  
- Improve attendance through reducing the gaps in attendance between different groups.
  
- Instigate and evaluate a programme to improve students' skills in literacy and numeracy across the academy.

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

Paul Chambers  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**