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Rob Watson (Executive headteacher)  
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Dear Mr Watson

### **No formal designation monitoring inspection of Gamlingay Village College**

Following my visit with Robert Barbour, Her Majesty's Inspector to your academy on 24–25 October 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 monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the academy's predecessor school was judged to be a school causing concern.

### **Evidence**

Inspectors observed the academy's work, watched every teacher delivering lessons, including four joint observations with school leaders, and conducted shorter visits to a series of lessons to look at how pupils of lower ability were being supported and how writing was being developed. They scrutinised documents, met with the Principal, the Executive Principal, two groups of pupils, parents, the Chair of the Governing Body and senior leaders.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The academy is making reasonable progress in raising standards for all pupils.

### **Context**

The academy is a small middle school with 173 pupils currently on roll. The proportions of students from minority ethnic groups and of students known to be eligible for free school meals are lower than average. The proportion of students with special educational needs supported at school action is below average. The

proportion with a statement of special educational needs or supported at school action plus is broadly average. The academy opened in February 2012 and is sponsored by Stratton Education Trust in a federation with Stratton Upper School. Considerable staffing changes have taken place since becoming an academy, including new appointments and collaborative working arrangements across the two schools. The Executive Headteacher for the Trust is supported by the newly appointed Head of College who takes responsibility for the day-to-day leadership of Gamlingay Village College.

### **Achievement of pupils at the academy**

Standards are rising and pupils are making better progress than in the predecessor school. Improvements are most evident in Key Stage 2, in reading and in mathematics. Improvements in writing are slower. However, initiatives such as the special writing days, when pupils work in mixed-aged groups on a range of creative activities, are increasing both enjoyment and success in writing. Inspectors observed one of these days, where the theme of homelessness made a positive impact on pupils spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. One group produced moving raps that showed their empathy and musical skills. Another group of more-able pupils showed how well they were learning to write in a journalistic style and one low ability pupil expressed his outrage well in a letter to the Prime Minister.

The proportion of pupils in all key stages who make the progress expected of them has increased recently, in some cases significantly so. For example, pupils with a range of individual needs are supported well and case studies show they make better progress than others. Pupils who are known to be eligible for pupil premium funding are closing the gap with other groups by making more rapid progress. Some lower attaining pupils are making good progress which is helping them catch up.

In lessons, pupils make at least satisfactory and often good progress. Outstanding progress was also seen, for example in a technology lesson. Here, the pupils responded exceptionally well to the high expectations of the teacher. Careful attention to individual needs meant they were highly motivated and engaged in the work. In addition, their reading, writing, speaking and number skills were being developed well at the same time as their skills and knowledge of technology. Pupils make slower progress in lessons where they have to sit and listen to the teacher for too long.

### **The quality of teaching**

Teaching has improved since the academy opened. The leaders who have responsibility for teaching are able to identify effective teaching and what a teacher needs to do to improve. They are skilful at giving feedback that is both supportive and challenging. A growing number of teachers regularly demonstrate good practice which is shared to improve teaching further. Pupils say they enjoy lessons more because they are given more 'hands-on stuff' to do.

Where teaching leads to the most progress it is characterised by:

- clear lesson objectives and a series of interesting activities to lead pupils to those outcomes
- questioning that draws out extended answers from pupils and gives them time to think
- high expectations that pupils will take responsibility and join in with activities throughout the lesson
- a strong focus on literacy, especially through careful marking.

Examples of these characteristics include a Year 8 mathematics lesson, where pupils were required to justify and explain all answers, correct or incorrect. This allowed the teacher to have a very clear understanding of misconceptions and whether pupils were ready for a greater level of challenge.

In most lessons, there is evidence of the training which has focused on a number of key strategies for improving learning. However, in some lessons these are not yet skilfully applied by the teacher. As a result, the careful plans are not carried out effectively, with too much time taken by teachers explaining what will happen and giving the pupils too little time to develop their ideas. In question and answer sessions, some pupils are allowed to be passive because the teacher relies on volunteers to give the answers.

Pupils' social skills are developed well because pupils are given regular opportunities to work together in groups. In some lessons, more-able pupils are benefiting from opportunities to lead and sometimes support other pupils. Some teachers make good use of technology to bring subjects to life and support clear explanations with pictures. However, on occasions other teachers rely on lengthy spoken explanations where an example or model of what is needed would be more efficient.

### **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

The inspection did not focus on behaviour, as this was good in the predecessor school. Even so, pupils feel that behaviour has improved and that there is a positive 'buzz' in the school. Pupils behave well in lessons and are very helpful, polite and attentive to each other's needs. They continue to attend well and enjoy school.

A number of common routines for managing behaviour in the classroom have been established and their consistent application supports less experienced teachers well. As a result, all lessons are orderly and no time is wasted moving from one activity to the next.

Attendance and punctuality are good. Pupils have a good understanding of how to stay safe and of the various forms of bullying that could occur. Pupils take responsibility in the school as mathematics champions, buddy readers and through their roles on the school council.

### **The quality of leadership in and management of the academy**

Leadership has been strengthened and stabilised through the federation with the upper school. The subject expertise there is used well to improve teaching in Key Stage 3. Collaboration and responsibilities that span the two schools are strengthening support for the most vulnerable pupils, especially when they move to Year 9.

Leadership in the predecessor school had improved by the time of the second monitoring visit. Further changes to the structure of the leadership team are allowing leaders to hold people to account more effectively for success in their areas of responsibility. Monitoring activities take place regularly and use a range of evidence. This leads to development plans which identify appropriate priorities. The criteria by which success will be judged are not sufficiently focused on outcomes for pupils. Some describe what will have been done and not the impact the actions are intended to have. Training for teachers is designed to meet their individual needs or to address common issues. The programme includes coaching and opportunities to observe good practice.

The governing body of the Trust is challenging and supportive and holds leaders at all levels to account for improving the outcomes for the pupils. Governors have a detailed understanding of the strengths and remaining weaknesses in the school. They pay close attention to how academy funds are used. This includes the use of performance management to reward effective teaching and the use of the pupil premium funding.

The academy has greatly improved its systems for assessing pupils and then checking the progress they are making. By using standardised tests and then having them marked externally, leaders have ensured the accuracy of teachers' own assessments and thus the reliability of the data they are using. Leaders gather and analyse this data to check how well individuals and groups of pupils are progressing and are using the evidence to focus their efforts where they are most needed. The academy acknowledges that the analysis of the progress pupils make in subjects other than English, mathematics and science in Years 7 and 8 requires improvement.

### **External support**

The local authority has continued to provide support for the academy when needed. It was commissioned to conduct a detailed review of teaching and learning in June 2012. The upper school in the Trust provides wide ranging support and strengthens capacity through subject expertise and leadership skills. Membership of a group of similar schools allows the academy to share good practice and ideas that are of particular relevance to the middle school age range.

## **Priorities for further improvement**

- Spread the existing good and outstanding qualities of teaching to ensure all teachers:
  - use questions to challenge and deepen pupils' understanding and do so in a way that involves all pupils
  - plan and deliver lessons so the activities provide sufficient opportunities for pupils to meet the planned objective of the lesson.
- Strengthen leadership at all levels by ensuring leaders use the data on outcomes for pupils to hold others to account.

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 published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Taylor  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**