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13 December 2012

Ms Rosemary Wiles  
Tree Tops Academy  
Brishing Lane  
Park Wood  
Maidstone  
Kent  
ME15 9EZ

Dear Ms Wiles

### **No formal designation monitoring inspection of Tree Tops Academy**

Following my visit with Robert Lovett, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 11–12 December 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 school's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive headteacher, other senior and middle leaders, the Chair of the Governing Body, pupils and representatives from the Academy Enterprise Trust. In addition, inspectors had informal conversations with pupils in classes and around the school.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy is not making enough progress in raising standards for all pupils. This visit has raised serious concerns and the timing of the academy's next inspection may be affected.

### **Context**

Tree Tops Academy was created in April 2012 following the closure of Bell Wood Primary School. Tree Tops is in a hard federation with a neighbouring academy. Both

academies are governed by a federated governing body and both are led by an executive headteacher. A head of school for Tree Tops Academy took up her post in April 2012. There have also been changes in the middle leadership of the academy, and five new staff, including two newly qualified teachers, joined the academy in April 2012. The academy is sponsored by the Academies Enterprise Trust, an established academy sponsor.

The academy is of average size and most pupils are of White British heritage. There are 240 pupils on roll. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium for free school meals is more than double the national average. A lower-than-average proportion of pupils speak English as an additional language. Almost 35% of pupils are disabled or have special educational needs and are at the school action or school action plus stage of support. Predominantly, these pupils have language and communication difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social issues. More pupils than is usual join or leave the academy part-way through their primary education. Current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectations for pupils' attainment and progress, are not being met.

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

Children enter the academy with skills and knowledge levels well below those expected for their age. Rates of progress in the Early Years Foundation Stage are improving as a result of the improvements in teaching and leadership. The Early Years Foundation Stage leader carefully tracks children's progress and holds teachers to account. She has developed an interim tracking system which links effectively to children's learning journeys in order to highlight the most and least able children and provide appropriate challenge for all.

Pupils enter Key Stage 1 with below-average levels of attainment. Pupils' progress is beginning to accelerate because of the improved quality of teaching, although rates of progress are inconsistent between classes. For older pupils, the 2012 unvalidated national test data indicates that standards of attainment remain well below the national average, particularly at the higher levels. Predictions for pupil outcomes at Key Stage 2 in 2013 indicate improvement, but lesson observations and pupils' workbooks show that progress in both English and mathematics is still too slow. The gaps between the achievement of groups of pupils in the academy and the achievement of groups nationally are showing little signs of closing.

Senior leaders have correctly identified the achievement of all pupils as a particular area of concern. However, this awareness and analysis of underachievement are not yet informing teachers' planning well enough. As a result, activities in lessons are not well matched to pupils' abilities and needs, and this limits their progress and the pace of learning. Furthermore, systems for tracking pupils' progress are not yet in place, and so senior leaders do not have a clear idea of how well pupils have achieved since the academy opened in April 2012.

## **The quality of teaching**

Although some good teaching was seen during the inspection, too much requires improvement or was inadequate. Where teaching is strong, teachers make it clear to pupils what they are going to learn; they plan lessons to make sure that all pupils are given work that gets the best out of them and often make checks to deal with pupils' misunderstandings. However, most lessons are not like this and, as a result, pupils are not making enough progress. This is because in classes of mixed ages and abilities, during periods where whole-class teaching occurs the teaching too rarely meets the full range of needs. Younger or less able pupils struggle with aspects of the work at times, while older or more able pupils have little to extend their learning.

Although different independent work is set for pupils of different ages and abilities, pupils spend too long on mundane tasks that do not move learning on fast enough. In too many lessons, teachers are not always skilled in planning learning that challenges pupils in their thinking and do not readily adapt tasks if pupils do not respond as expected. Through meetings to discuss the progress of their pupils, the teachers have an improving picture of what pupils already know and are able to do.

Lessons are well planned, but the success with which these plans are implemented is often hindered by shortcomings that restrict progress. For example, in some lessons teachers do not introduce clearly what is going to be learned and often instructions are couched in jargon which is difficult for pupils to understand. The quality of marking in pupils' workbooks is variable; some marking is regular and encouraging, but generally it does not provide pupils with sufficient guidance on how to improve.

Teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage is effective, allowing children to progress at least as well as they should, and sometimes better. This is because basic skills, especially in reading and writing, develop at a good pace because teaching is sharply focused on children's individual needs. Staff work well together as a team, monitoring and recording children's development. This ensures that they have a very good understanding of how much progress is being achieved, what level of intervention is needed and what needs to be focused on next.

## **Behaviour and safety of pupils**

Pupils generally move calmly and quietly around the large school building. The majority are respectful to adults. Pupils are usually interested in learning, however, there are instances in lessons when their attention wanders or when pupils are passive and compliant, rather than active and enthusiastic. Pupils cooperate well in lessons, for example when sharing ideas with their partners. They work productively both individually and in groups when teachers have high expectations. In a Year 5 and 6 mathematics lesson, for example, the pace was brisk, work was challenging and so pupils were fully engaged. In other lessons, learning is less successful

because activities do not match pupils' needs and capabilities and teachers sometimes expect too little, resulting in instances of low-level disruption.

There have been some improvements in attendance, which is now in line with the national average. However, significant differences in pupils' attendance remain between classes. Punctuality is improving slowly but remains a cause for concern. The number of fixed-term exclusions has risen sharply since the academy opened in April 2012. Alternative classroom arrangements have been made for a group of pupils at risk of exclusion. While inspectors observed pupils interacting and chatting happily with adults, some pupils' access to a broad and balanced curriculum, social interaction with peers and opportunities to work collaboratively are limited by their removal from their classmates.

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

Academy leaders and the Academy Enterprise Trust judge the academy to be vulnerable and fragile because of significant weaknesses in achievement, pupils' behaviour and the quality of teaching. Academy leaders have had too little impact on the overall quality of provision and outcomes for pupils and are not, therefore, demonstrating sufficient capacity to improve. Roles and responsibilities for both senior and middle leaders are unclear. Subject leaders have not had opportunities for joint working or shadowing senior leaders. For example, they have not been given the appropriate levels of support to enable them to monitor teaching, scrutinise pupils' books and accurately judge levels of pupils' achievements. Academy leaders are not sufficiently self-critical and have an inaccurate and over-generous view of how well the academy is progressing.

Planning to bring about improvement is not sharp enough. As a result, standards have not risen quickly enough, particularly in Key Stage 2, and overall, the quality of teaching is inadequate. The governing body ensures that statutory requirements, such as those for recruitment and vetting checks, are fully met. The governing body is supportive but it does not question performance in sufficient depth, and does not play a strong enough part in shaping and driving improvement.

### **External support**

The Academy Enterprise Trust has an accurate view of the school's performance and what needs to improve most urgently. A range of support strategies to improve teaching have been provided through the services of a local National Leader in Education and consultants but this has not yet been successful in tackling the fundamental inadequacies of teaching in the classrooms.

### **Priorities for further improvement**

- As matter of urgency, ensure all pupils are fully included in the life of the school and have access to a broad and challenging curriculum.
- Raise achievement by ensuring all teaching is at least good.
- Urgently review the arrangements for the leadership and management of the school, including governance.

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

Kekshan Salaria  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**