

27 June 2008

Mr David Lewis
Executive Director
Sheffield Springs Academy
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Dear Mr Lewis

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Sheffield Springs Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Cathryn Kirby HMI and Susan Bowles HMI to your academy on 25 and 26 June 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring visit in connection with the academies initiative.

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Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the executive director, the chair of governors, the deputy headteachers, the director of studies, the data manager, the head of upper school, two heads of faculty and other staff who have subject responsibilities, staff in charge of the specialisms, a group of teachers new to the academy or to the profession, a group of students in Years 7 to 10 and a group of sixth-form students. Inspectors observed 30 lessons, an assembly and two form periods.

Context

The academy opened in September 2006, housed in the buildings of the predecessor school. A year later, it opened a sixth form in collaboration with Sheffield Park Academy, the first sixth form in the locality for a couple of decades. The academy moved into new buildings in February 2008; the facilities are complete except for some for physical education. Its specialism is performing arts.

Sheffield Springs and Park Academies opened in tandem. They share the same

sponsor, United Learning Trust, and have many structures and systems in common. Both have experienced turbulence in senior leadership at head and deputy head levels. The executive director took up post in November 2006. A year later, a deputy head from Sheffield Springs was appointed as head of school at Sheffield Park. The executive director has since fulfilled the two roles of head of school at Sheffield Springs and executive director for both academies. Other areas of common leadership include the director of studies, who is responsible for the collaborative sixth form, the data manager, and there is a single governing body.

The academy has experienced difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified staff, particularly in mathematics and science. Levels of absence among staff were high but have reduced substantially. These two factors have meant that the academy has been dependent on temporary teachers. Currently there are nine, several of whom are providing specialist long-term cover. The academy has a full complement of staff for the next academic year.

There are 965 students aged 11 to 17 years on roll, of whom 41 are in the first year of the sixth form. The numbers of boys and girls are roughly equal. Thirty four Year 6 pupils joined the academy following the national Key Stage 2 tests; this initiative is part of the 'Early Risers' pilot. Fewer students than is typical enter the academy at times other than in Year 7. About 13% of students are of minority ethnic heritage and 6% speak home languages other than English. Around a third of students, which is double the average, have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and, of these, nine have statements of special educational need. The academy serves a community that experiences severe social and economic disadvantage and has little tradition of further and higher education; 35% of students have free school meals and 80% of the sixth-form students are eligible for the educational maintenance allowance.

Achievement and standards

Students' attainment on entry to the academy is low. It is slightly stronger in Years 7 and 8 than in the other year groups. Those students who transferred into Years 10 and 11 in 2006 had significantly underachieved during Key Stage 3. This means the academy inherited a legacy of underachievement. Moreover, many students were not well equipped with basic skills to enable them to make the most of the curriculum. Weaknesses in literacy, including speaking and listening, remain significant barriers to learning. The academy has given appropriate priority to developing literacy in all subjects, providing training and useful support materials for staff, but the impact has been variable. Evaluation is underway; analysis of teacher assessments of students currently in Year 9 indicates an increased proportion of lower attainers have made good progress in English.

In the national Key Stage 3 tests in 2007, nearly 40% of the students reached the standard expected of 14 year olds, Level 5, in English and mathematics, and 32% in science. These results are stronger than those of the predecessor school in 2006. However, the data show that too many students made insufficient progress, particularly those with the lowest starting points and many who have learning difficulties. While the 2008 Key Stage 3 teacher assessments indicate a little improvement, standards remain too low and, if mirrored in the test results, they

represent continuing underachievement. Difficulties with staffing have had greater impact in this key stage. A positive feature, though, is the substantial reduction in students' absence from the tests from around 12% to 5%. This reflects students' more positive attitudes, aided by determined pastoral management.

The picture of improvement is stronger at Key Stage 4, although standards remain well below average. In 2007, 31% of the students gained five or more A* to C grades, a sharp rise when compared with the final set of results for the predecessor school, breaking through the 'floor target' and exceeding the academy's target. However, only 20% included English and mathematics in their five or more passes, which was nevertheless roughly double the figure for the predecessor school, and very few students achieved the highest A/A* grades. While almost all students gained at least one qualification, the proportion gaining five or more A* to G grades remained well below target at 74%. Many factors contributed to the improvements, including targeted intervention with key groups of students. The academy is confidently predicting further rises in 2008. The high failure rate in some subjects in 2007 has been tackled through clearer guidance on coursework and entry policy.

The academy's procedures for setting targets and monitoring students' progress are becoming established, aided by well-organised data management. The 2008/09 assessment plan recognises the need to ensure that targets for individual students are appropriately challenging and places responsibility on all teachers for raising students' attainment. The plan might usefully be linked to the need, recognised by senior staff, to improve the accuracy and consistency of assessment by teachers and the use of data to inform curricular and lesson planning. Moreover, there is scope to extend the analysis of data to raise questions about the quality of provision and aid development.

Personal development and well-being

Attendance has risen significantly this year, up by six percentage points to just over 90%, although this remains below the national average. Rigorous systems have also led to improvements in punctuality, though a few students persist in not being on time and well prepared to learn. Exclusions have been cut substantially from high levels: 65 days of learning have been lost this year. Use of 'on report' and the incidence of students caught out of lessons have reduced. All of this contributes to the growing evidence of effective strategic planning to make the academy more inclusive. Key appointments of support staff, who are well placed to build links with students and families and have clear remits within coherent academy systems for identifying and tackling potential disaffection, are at an early stage. Strenuous efforts have been made to keep in touch with the hardest to reach groups of students, with positive impact on some key indicators, such as the reducing numbers who leave without any qualifications or who do not enter education, training or employment.

Many students behave well, whether closely supervised or not. A minority behave poorly even when they are supervised. There are inconsistencies in the effectiveness with which behaviour is managed. In seven lessons, students' behaviour and attitudes to learning were unsatisfactory. While this was sometimes exacerbated by weaknesses in teaching, some students' misbehaviour was deliberate with instances

of unacceptable language. Some students expressed frustration with the malicious or silly behaviour that disrupts learning. While behaviour is undoubtedly much better than it was, there is some way to go before it is consistently better than satisfactory.

Students are very clear that the academy is a safer and much more enjoyable place to be, especially since moving into the new buildings. They appreciate the ever-present support staff, saying they 'will give you time and are easy to talk to'. Staff provide strong role models, and relationships are generally positive. Some students contribute as ambassadors on formal occasions or spontaneously go out of their way to respond to others in need. Students from different backgrounds generally work and socialise harmoniously.

Quality of provision

Inspection evidence broadly supports the academy's view of the quality of teaching. It was good and occasionally outstanding in around a third of the lessons and satisfactory in a half. The quality of learning was not as strong in some lessons for various reasons, including students' attitudes and weaknesses in their basic skills. New technology is having a positive effect on teaching. Students said some teachers use it to provide interesting activities; others spoke of the drama studios as 'amazing places', saying, 'even in Year 7 you get to control lighting effects'. In many lessons, teachers were quietly persistent in making sure their expectations were met. They drew on secure subject knowledge to give clear explanations, although the emphasis at times was on following techniques rather than building understanding. Displays of students' work were rare. Assessment criteria were sometimes on view but not often used effectively to support learning. The quality of marking was variable, but with some examples of good practice.

Characteristics of the good lessons included effective use of resources such as interactive whiteboards and visual stimuli to make learning interesting. Learning objectives were explained clearly so that students understood them. Teachers sequenced activities effectively, monitoring how well students were learning, although greater use could be made of strategies such as mini-whiteboards for checking their understanding. Some teachers stopped the lesson periodically to make teaching points or revisit the learning objectives. In the best lessons, relationships were marked by firmness and respect. These teachers used questioning particularly skilfully, listening to students' responses and building on their ideas.

A weakness common to much of the teaching was the lesson planning: learning objectives were often expressed as activities rather than specifying what was to be learned and, as a consequence, there was too little clarity about how progress would be assessed. Teachers are provided with information about students' prior attainment and targets, but this rarely informs planning, and is recognised as an area for development, as is the accuracy of teachers' assessment. Although information about students' individual needs was often outlined in plans, there were usually no correspondingly adapted tasks or resources to support those students' learning. Although some plans identified what all, most and some students might learn, these expectations were not always suitably graded in challenge or linked to different activities. As a result, some students made less progress than they should.

Some teachers talked over low-level chatter rather than insisting on students' attention; others talked while students were concentrating on independent work. Where weaknesses in teaching combined with insecure management of behaviour and uncooperative attitudes on the part of some students in the class, learning became inadequate.

Although teachers share a commitment to improving literacy, and, occasionally, other skills like numeracy and team working, opportunities are sometimes missed and strategies are not as effective as they need to be to have a more than superficial impact. For instance, although key words are displayed, their meanings are not always explored. Students have too few opportunities to practise speaking and listening in ways that challenge them to think hard about the subject and to use its language accurately. In part, this relates to many teachers' lack of skills in managing group work and whole-class discussion. There are pockets of good practice in teaching literacy, such as explicit teaching and modelling, but this has not spread far enough. Even in literacy support classes, talk is not always well managed.

Curriculum

The broader curriculum offered from September 2007 has given more choice to students and better meets their diverse needs. Excellent specialist accommodation complements the course offer well. Development work at key transition points is helping to make students' journey through learning smoother and more coherent. In particular, the 'Early Risers' initiative has been successful in enabling Year 6 pupils to take the step from primary to secondary education in a carefully managed and nurturing environment.

The performing arts specialism has given a strong lead to curriculum developments, although a number are still in the early stages; for example, 30 Year 9 students have completed a GCSE in expressive arts this year. A carousel approach to timetabling from September 2008 will enable all students to use the new facilities and benefit from a curriculum designed to develop their self-confidence and interpersonal and communication skills. Although much work has been done to improve the match of the curriculum to the needs of learners, senior staff acknowledge that the curriculum is still developing with further work required, particularly in providing suitable courses to meet the needs of the most vulnerable young people.

Implementation of the academy's policy to support students' weak literacy skills is inconsistent. Consequently, in some lessons, low levels of literacy limit the extent to which students are able to access the wider curriculum. Unsatisfactory behaviour and attitudes to learning impede some students' engagement with curriculum options they themselves have chosen and hampers their progress.

Leadership and management

Many students and staff emphasised how much the academy has changed so much for the better this year, citing examples of students' improved behaviour leading to better learning. Morale among staff is positive; one student observed, 'Teachers

seem so much happier – they seem to enjoy teaching us now.’ While the move to the new buildings four months ago provided a welcome boost and, in many ways, a renewed start to academy life, the roots of improvement can be tracked further back. Such a transformation in ethos is attributable to successful leadership and management. The executive director, supported by his leadership team, celebrates the journey the academy has undertaken so far but is under no illusion about what remains to be done. A key ingredient in this will be to raise expectations of what is possible, starting from a precise evaluation of the current position rather than trying to gauge progress from earlier times. Many staff showed a readiness to engage in discussion about areas for development in their classroom or managerial roles. This strengthens the academy’s capacity to meet challenges ahead and drive further improvement.

Whole-academy self-evaluation is satisfactory. The academy has a broadly accurate picture of the quality of provision, where improvement has been made and what remains to be done. Where there is less clarity is in improvement planning: the current development plan identifies actions to be taken but does not include arrangements for monitoring and evaluation or success criteria against which impact can be measured. Subject leaders have recently written self-evaluations and action plans are being drawn up. These should follow a common format with all the expected ingredients of good development planning. Meetings at various levels throughout the academy are appropriately minuted, although some quality assurance sections tend to describe what activity is planned rather than providing feedback on the outcomes of monitoring and any associated implications.

The role of middle managers is developing satisfactorily: they are involved in monitoring provision and providing feedback to colleagues. This is an accepted part of the academy’s work. Records of lesson observations, however, focus on what the teacher did rather than the impact the teaching had on the learning. Leadership of subjects is through a system of five faculties. Much of the quality assurance of the academy’s academic work is carried out by heads of faculty, supported by those staff who have responsibility for subjects. Management systems and procedures are clearly defined and conscientiously implemented but with some variation in how effectively areas for development are pinpointed and followed through to make a difference to the quality of students’ learning and their longer-term achievement. For example, weaknesses such as a lack of attention to the wide range of students’ needs, poor quality work and graffiti in students’ exercise books, are not always picked up and followed through robustly to secure improvement. The heads of faculty are members of the senior leadership team. In effect, their responsibilities bridge middle and senior leadership. While the academy makes some use of the school improvement partner and external review to check on the quality and effectiveness of their work, it would be better practice if this was a way of triangulating senior leaders’ firsthand assessments of quality and impact of actions taken. The academy cannot afford to develop reliance on external views as a means of gauging the quality of provision.

The governing body was constituted in September 2006. Most governors were new to the role. They provide committed support for the academy, focusing on assisting the executive director and senior staff in bringing stability and improvement. The

chair is proud of how effectively senior staff have worked together to achieve this. The next stage in the development of the governors' role is to ensure they also provide the level of challenge required to help raise standards further, especially at Key Stage 3.

The academy is poised to accelerate progress. It is oversubscribed next year for the first time, and is due to be fully staffed with specialist teachers, quite a few of whom will be newly qualified, including five in science. It is crucial that support for new teachers is proactive and sets out to build success in the classroom. Senior leaders will need to ensure that faculties are equipped to meet these professional demands.

The Sixth Form

The collaborative sixth form is well led and managed. Staff recently appointed to join the academy from September 2008, potentially add to the capacity for the development of the sixth form. A good start has been made to delivering post-16 provision across a range of programmes at different academic levels. Small teaching groups, good classroom relationships and a well-resourced learning environment have contributed to good retention rates and satisfactory attendance. Of the small number of sixth-form lessons observed, none were less than satisfactory. Teachers new to sixth-form teaching are keen to develop their teaching styles and strategies to support independent learning.

Assessments and records for tracking individual students' progress show that all students are on course to meet their targets. Reports from external moderators confirm that internal assessment is secure. Students are very positive about their experience of sixth-form study. They value greatly the individual support made possible by the small teaching groups and are appreciative of the excellent facilities available to them. Many opportunities are afforded to students to enrich their learning experience, for example, rock climbing, sports coaching and lifeguard qualifications, visits to universities and participation in the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. These, together with a number of opportunities to take on responsibility within the academy, contribute significantly to students' personal development, an outcome of provision which they themselves recognise.

The academy is aware that the very ambitious plans for expansion in September 2008 need to be carefully managed to ensure that emerging strengths are not diminished.

External support

The academy makes good use of links with external partners. These include productive relationships with local businesses and several local schools. The academy has a good arrangement with the local authority through which work in the core subjects is supported by National Strategy consultants. Links with initial teacher education providers have had a positive impact on recruitment. The academy plays its part within the family of United Learning Trust schools and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

The executive director finds that the school improvement partner provides a good level of challenge, and appreciates the positive recognition of achievements to date coupled with pointers for improvement. It is not, however, always clear in the school improvement partner's reports how effectively developments and actions have been followed through by the academy from one visit to the next. A recent external review reported positively on progress on a number of fronts including literacy and assessment, but this inspection found that not all are embedded features of the academy's work.

Main Judgement

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards at Key Stage 3.
- Strengthen the quality of teaching, ensuring all lessons are well planned.
- Improve teachers' use and accuracy of assessment.
- Capitalise on the improved ethos to build students' independence as learners.
- Sharpen the interpretation of outcomes of monitoring and, hence, improve the quality of development planning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, and the Academies Group at the DCSF.

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones
HM Inspector of Schools

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dcf.gsi.gov.uk]