

Tribal Group
1-4 Portland
Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR
T 0845 123 6001
F 0845 123 6002

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



16 March 2009

Ms J Shadick
The Principal
Swindon Academy
Headlands Grove
Headlands School
Swindon
SN2 7HS

Dear Ms Shadick

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Swindon Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with John Kennedy HMI, Meena Wood HMI, Christopher Nye HMI and Alan Taylor Bennett HMI to your academy on 3 and 4 March 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the principal, associate principal, vice and assistant principals, subject leaders, teaching staff, groups of pupils, governors and a representative of the sponsors.

Context

Swindon Academy opened in September 2007. At that time it was formed from three predecessor schools, one secondary, one junior and one infant. In January 2009 an all through primary school joined the academy. It is central to the vision of Swindon Academy that it will be one school offering education for children and young people aged 0 to 19. At the time of the visit the academy is still using the three sites of its predecessor schools. New accommodation is being built for part of the primary population and all of the secondary population and it is planned that these will be ready for use by January 2010. From that time the academy will operate from two sites. In seeking to ensure that the academy provides a holistic education and avoids the pitfalls of transition between key stages, the curriculum is divided into three phases: foundation stage for pupils from Nursery to Year 3; the development stage



for those in Years 4 to 8, and the extension phase for those in Year 9 to the end of the sixth form.

The academy's staffing structure is in a state of transition following the recent amalgamation of the fourth school. Recruitment has been getting easier but, at the time of the monitoring visit, the post of vice principal leading curriculum and teaching and learning was vacant. Overall, however, staffing has been fairly stable.

There are 1200 pupils on roll, the vast majority of whom are White British. Many come from families who are struggling. Less than one in ten pupils is from a minority ethnic group, but many of those that are speak English as an additional language. The range of home languages includes Portuguese, Nepali, Albanian and Lithuanian. Around half of the pupils have learning difficulties, although in some year groups the proportion is as high as 60%. Most of these have either moderate difficulties in learning or behavioural, social and emotional difficulties.

Achievement and standards

Overall trends in standards at all levels are improving. However, there remain significant gaps between the standards attained by pupils at Swindon Academy and the national average. Last summer, results at Key Stage 4 were significantly below target, but this year standards at this level are back on track.

The progress made by pupils is an improving picture too; but whilst some year groups are making satisfactory and even good progress in core subjects, others, particularly higher up the academy, are not making enough progress.

Children entering the Early Years Foundation Stage are well below expected levels in their development of communication, numerical, social and physical skills. Generally, through the foundation and early development phases they make satisfactory progress. This has been helped by the introduction of concentrated work on building their knowledge of phonics and their ability to decode text. The academy leaders rightly recognised, however, that whilst this was leading to significant gains in reading, pupils need more help with their writing, and have recently introduced a scheme to support this. Steady progress is also being made in numeracy in Key Stages 1 and 2, but older pupils do not have a secure grasp of important basics such as multiplication tables. This too is being addressed.

Most pupils in the development and extension phases have very significant gaps in their learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy. These are inhibiting their further progress. Academy leaders recognise that there is much to be done to enable pupils to catch up before they can move on in their learning. Higher ability students make better progress than others and progress in English in this phase is stronger than in mathematics.

The progress made by most students in the sixth form has been very limited by their low prior attainment and by the lack of appropriate courses on offer for them. This too is an improving picture as the range of courses has been extended.

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour around the academy sites is generally satisfactory. It is better on the primary sites than on the secondary. Pupils and staff are agreed that there has been a significant improvement in behaviour and in the consequent climate for learning. The number of pupils of primary age being excluded for a fixed term has dropped very significantly and there are few permanent exclusions.

Attendance has improved significantly in the foundation and early development phases. There have been some improvements in Key Stages 3 and 4, but there remain important weaknesses. The partnership with the education welfare service is not effective and, at the moment, there are too many pupils with poor attendance rates. Equally, there are some inaccuracies in the way that attendance is recorded.

Pupils arrive at lessons promptly and where teaching is good participate in their learning to at least an acceptable degree. However, as the academy leaders are aware, pupils are not resilient learners and faced with challenge or uninspiring teaching their behaviour deteriorates and is sometimes disruptive. On the secondary site, the internal exclusions unit is extremely effective in supporting those who have difficulty in managing behaviour.

Generally pupils do not have high self regard. This is preventing them from making the most of opportunities that are on offer and from valuing their own achievements. There is a good uptake of sporting opportunities however, which is both contributing to increasingly healthy lifestyle choices and to improved attitudes and developing leadership skills. There is scope for pupils to contribute much more fully to the leadership of the academy. They do not yet feel that their voice is heard.

Pupils feel safe. They acknowledge that there is some bullying but feel that it is well managed. They know that they are well cared for in the academy and are confident that there are adults that they can turn to in case of difficulties. Some of the older pupils talked to inspectors with pride about the vision of the future that they recognise that the principal aspires to on their behalf.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching is varied throughout the academy. There is good, but also inadequate, teaching. Overall, it is satisfactory. Senior leaders are knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses in this area.

Teachers plan carefully for their lessons which are generally focused around clear learning objectives. Sometimes, however, teachers do not manage to match their teaching to the range of learning needs that their pupils have. This is particularly an

issue when there are gaps in pupils' vocabulary, conceptual knowledge, or prior learning which need to be addressed before new areas are tackled. Where pupils are not engaged in learning, their behaviour deteriorates and becomes disruptive for all.

Information and communication technology is used well to support teaching and make learning more interesting. Many lessons have good pace and an appropriate balance of teacher and pupil led activity. Although marking systems have been established, they are not yet used consistently across the academy. As a result, pupils are not always aware what they are aiming for and what they need to improve. Too many lessons in the development and extension phases are dominated by boys demanding the teachers' attention and answering all the questions posed to the class.

In some lessons teaching assistants make a very good contribution to learning, for example by working with small groups; but in others they are not well used by the teacher.

The academy is rising to the challenge of developing a coherent 0 to 19 curriculum. Important steps have been made to enable pupils to access a curriculum that is appropriate to their stage in learning rather than their age. Adjustments have been made to the curriculum in the foundation phase to ensure that the pupils' language and communication needs are met. Specialist teachers are introduced in Years 5 and 6 to support pupils' progress in literacy and in numeracy and, at the moment, Years 7 and 8 pupils of lower ability follow a 'Home Curriculum' which allows them to spend a significant proportion of their day learning the core subjects with one teacher. Older pupils are able to take several GCSEs early and retake them to improve their grades should they wish.

The academy has made a satisfactory start to developing pathways that enable students to combine vocational and academic subjects. Plans are in place to ensure a greater range of level 2 courses next year and also introduce more, much needed, entry and level 1 courses. At the moment, the course offer in the sixth form is not meeting the range of needs presented by students.

An enthusiastic beginning has been made with the specialist curriculum of science, business and enterprise. Leaders are working hard to establish an aspirational ethos for pupils in these subjects through a growing range of activities across the phases. This includes quizzes, trips to places of work, and competitions aimed at all pupils. There is good engagement with parents and local communities through a small adult learning and family literacy provision and this is making a sound contribution to community cohesion.

Pupils are well cared for. There are clear and appropriate systems in place to ensure that they are well protected. The academy is particularly strong at providing support for its many emotionally vulnerable pupils. The Learning Skills Centre, together with individual staff, contributes powerfully in this area. The academy has not yet

however developed good support for pupils who are learning English as an additional language.

The progress that pupils make is tracked rigorously. This allows the academy to intervene and offer catch-up or alternative learning opportunities should their progress be inadequate. These in turn are starting to improve standards. It also enables leaders to form a clear picture of which groups are doing well and which less well and informs their decision making about future priorities.

Leadership and management

The academy structure makes significant demands on leadership and management with six key stages, three sites, a significant building programme, a legacy of underperformance and low self esteem of learners. The principal and her team have established a clear direction which is understood by pupils and staff. The principal's visibility, strong leadership and passion are held in high regard. Pupils recognise that there have been improvements and some feel sufficiently confident to express hope for the future.

Senior leaders are sharply focused on the achievement, standards and welfare of pupils. They set the academy challenging targets. Academy and department level planning is based on appropriate priorities and actions are valid and costed. Heads of department are growing into their leadership roles and taking increasing responsibility for monitoring provision. Governors support the academy well and hold the academy to account rigorously against overall targets.

Leaders have begun putting in place people and systems to effect improvement. One such area is the expansion of pupils' leadership roles within the academy. Another is the 0 to 19 curriculum, where significant developments have already taken place and the planning for others is well advanced. There have been strong efforts made to engage with parents and to enable them to support their children's learning well. These are well received by parents. In addition, a range of other events are held to try and reach out to the community, such as an English as an additional language workshop, DIY workshops for 'Dads and Lads', and mother and teenager workshops. Although there is a clear and appropriate policy on teaching and learning, and work is being done to support some teachers, this area is not currently being vigorously led as an academy wide drive for improvement. Overall, leaders have demonstrated satisfactory capacity for improvement.

External support

The academy works with a number of external partners to secure improvements. The United Learning Trust has supported the academy well in developing vision, demanding the highest standards, and in shaping the curriculum. Their consultants have also supported the academy in developing particular subjects. Together with the governors, they support the leadership of the principal.

One of the academy's sponsors, Honda, gives the academy good support in offering valuable opportunities to pupils to help them develop their life skills. They recognise that they have important business experience to offer the senior leadership team.

A School Improvement Partner makes regular visits to the academy.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Eradicate inadequate teaching and vigorously promote consistently good practice in teaching across the academy so that all lessons promote good learning.
- Implement systems to enable pupils to take a valuable role in the leadership of the academy.
- Ensure that pupils' literacy needs are addressed in all lessons across the curriculum.
- Reduce the variability in attendance so that all classes in all year groups achieve the academy's attendance targets.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Emma Ing
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF