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Mr T Mepham  
Principal  
The Steiner Academy  
Much Dewchurch  
Herefordshire  
HR2 8DL

Dear Mr Mepham

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to The Steiner Academy,  
Hereford.

## Introduction

Following my visit with Mark Mumby HMI to your academy on 19 and 20 November 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

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

## Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work and met with the principal, groups of pupils, the chair and vice chair of governors. Inspectors also visited 17 lessons and met with teachers, the school improvement partner and the leadership team. A range of pupils' workbooks and academy documentation was also scrutinised.

## Context

The Steiner Academy opened in September 2008. It is the only state funded academy providing education in line with the educational principles set out by Rudolf Steiner. It is currently using a mix of older premises and temporary portable classrooms on the site of the predecessor independent Steiner school. New academy buildings are being completed. There are 306 pupils on roll aged from 3-16 years. As a result of the move from full independence to academy status the intake has changed in recent months and, although most pupils attend from nearby villages, there are some that travel considerable distances. The proportion that has special educational needs and/or disabilities is currently around a third but increasing.

Currently four pupils have a statement of special educational need. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds or who are at the early stages of speaking English is very low.

Traditionally leadership in the school has been conducted via the College of Teachers but is now organised via a management group. Some new staff have been appointed at what, in mainstream schools, would be recognised as leadership levels by virtue of their specific additional responsibilities. The majority of staff have transferred from the predecessor school to the new academy but the leadership team, including the principal, have been appointed since opening. The academy has not applied for exemption from teaching the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. It offers two specialisms, Steiner education and the natural environment.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

National data regarding the progress made and standards reached in those subjects taught at the academy are unreliable indicators as many pupils do not sit national tests until the age of 16. For example, although a set of unvalidated data for 2009 for both attainment and progress from ages 7 to 11 is available for the academy, it does not reflect either the Steiner principles or the curriculum currently on offer.

The achievement and progress of pupils in kindergarten is outstanding in those aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage that are taught. These do not cover all areas of learning however and the academy has not applied for an exemption for this. Indeed it has no plans to do so. As a consequence, despite the outstanding practice evident in kindergarten, the academy is vulnerable to failure in a forthcoming inspection by not meeting fully the requirements of the curriculum for this age group.

Since opening, the academy has extended the range of award bearing courses available at age 16. These now include an additional course leading to an award in environmental studies alongside the GCSE courses in English language, literature and mathematics that have been studied for some time. The first cohort of students to have this wider offer is currently in Year 11. In 2009 students sat three GCSE courses only. In English, results were impressive with almost two thirds achieving grades A or A\* and 95% achieving a grade C or above. In mathematics, attainment was similarly high and this has been the case in previous years. The recently introduced pupil tracking system for pupils aged over 15 shows that almost all students are in line to achieve a distinction in their new courses.

Standards of speaking and listening skills are very high throughout the academy. Traditional subjects are often taught via lead narrative sessions and the pupils' knowledge and awareness of geographic, historical and social information are impressive. A key strength is the thoughtful and articulate way in which pupils describe the interrelationships between particular aspects of subjects. Pupils made

either satisfactory or good progress during the majority of lessons observed. The difference was directly related to the quality of teaching received. Strengths include the extensive vocabulary used in written work, although handwriting presentation is given a lower priority and is subsequently less well developed, as is the range of spelling strategies and punctuation. The use of precise and accurate mathematical vocabulary is not consistently evident in all classes, although there were instances of effective use of mathematical terminology. In the upper school this precise knowledge is clear. An example is in the very good understanding of trigonometry evident in class 10, taught via a deep awareness of the history of mathematics and application of mathematical knowledge.

Strategies to improve standards in literacy and numeracy are securely located in Steiner methodology. The rates at which students progress in the acquisition of knowledge do not align with other mainstream schools with a deliberate delay in some aspects and accelerated progress in later years. An example of this is in the use of information and communications technology (ICT) which is not introduced until the age of about 14 in line with Steiner principles.

The academy knows the destination of the pupils after leaving and all who enter further education are well prepared for it. This is evident in the subsequent very high success rates in, for example, A-level courses. Many pupils go on to study a wide range of subjects at higher education with impressive success. A large majority of pupils express their enjoyment of their time at the academy, particularly those with experience of other mainstream schooling. They appreciate that their teachers know them well and offer good support.

#### Other relevant pupil outcomes

The academy is aware that attendance levels are currently inadequate. This is due to a combination of factors including a tradition in the predecessor school that families could take pupils out of school to engage in alternative off site experiences. Although new systems to reduce this are now in place, it remains the case that in some classes attendance is worryingly low. Punctuality is variable, although some of this reflects the delay in long distance rural bus travel. Nevertheless, an informal approach to lesson timings can occasionally delay learning opportunities.

Behaviour is satisfactory overall and exemplary in some classes. Some pupils believe that a small fringe of bullying behaviour is present although they also acknowledge that it is easily sorted out by adults. A mature attitude to studying permeates the whole academy. A particular feature is the thoughtful approach to collaborative work evident in pupils' attitudes and a healthy desire to learn. The recently formed student council enables pupils to have an increasing voice in the life of the academy but currently lacks formal procedures or a budget to manage. The relationship the academy has with the local community is complex with students aware of some fragile relationships with the academy's neighbours. The academy has sought to

increase levels of engagement with the local community but recognises that this will take time to develop, particularly whilst the extensive building work continues. The premises' developments are in the early stages and are presenting some management difficulties for the academy, including some aspects of site safety and security which require improving. These have impeded the development of a wider range of extra curricular opportunities, partly by restricting the outdoor hard play area available. Pupils themselves express a desire to experience a more extensive range of sports and earlier access to ICT. Whilst they are aware of the academy's policy on teaching ICT, many have routine access to it at home.

Pupils have a good awareness of healthy and safe lifestyles and appropriate advice on, for example, the dangers of drug taking is included where appropriate. Outdoor activity in general is a strength despite the limitations noted above and the academy has ambitious plans to respond to the pupils' requests for more sports. A strong experience of music, dance and physical activity through the regular eurythmy sessions and other lessons contributes well to healthy emotional and physical development.

#### The effectiveness of provision

The curriculum on offer is broad and balanced in accordance with Steiner principles. It meets the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, well. However, there are some aspects, particularly in the Early Years Foundation Stage, which by choice would not meet the requirements of a full maintained school inspection. In the upper school the academy has recently increased the breadth of the curriculum with the introduction of additional studies closely linked to the chosen specialism in natural environment.

The effectiveness of teaching varies but is at its strongest in the kindergarten and upper school and is satisfactory overall. Some outstanding teaching was seen, including in modern foreign languages, science and music. In the lessons observed particular strengths were the subject knowledge of many teachers, very good relationships between pupils and teachers, and the calm purposeful atmosphere established in most classrooms. Teachers used a good range of teaching styles, including modelling effective learning and the consolidation of prior learning at the start of lessons. The use of child-adult questioning was a strong feature in the kindergarten and upper school, along with a high emphasis on independent learning to which the pupils respond well. However, there was a noticeable lack of questioning to develop assessment of pupils' progress in the lower school. The opportunities pupils have to contribute to lessons via extended questioning and discussion are inconsistent. In some classes in the lower school pupils show limited levels of engagement in the less practical sessions.

The weaknesses evident in teaching include the slow pace of learning in some lessons, long periods of passivity for pupils between the ages of 8 and 12, and less

effective planning. Planning for meeting the needs of all pupils was not fully secure and in most lessons a formal teaching style in which all pupils do the same thing at the same time was evident. Although this is intentional, it leads to variable progress for some pupils who are capable of learning more rapidly. These features combine in some classes to reduce pupils' progress and where this is evident, standards of behaviour decline accordingly. Pupils say that in some subjects there is an opportunity to increase the level of challenge, particularly for more able pupils.

Pupils receive very effective additional support where required. This is managed well by the learning support team. Carefully targeted additional support, following a thoughtful assessment procedure, means that pupils with additional learning needs make good progress.

### The effectiveness of leadership and management

Although the academy does not recognise traditional leadership structures, preferring to manage via a wider management team, it has appointed additional personnel to undertake key responsibilities. This includes the principal who has extensive expertise in Steiner methodology. Other senior professionals have accepted additional responsibility for managing teaching and learning and key administrative tasks. This is a thoughtful response to the demands of public accountability that accompany academy funding. Experienced in Steiner schooling, this team is however, implementing rapid and effective change across many managerial fronts and, supported by satisfactory governance, this is testimony to their capacity to secure improvement. Their role as 'pathfinders' in this particular academy has been tackled with enthusiasm and integrity.

The academy's leadership has an ambitious vision which is shared with the staff and academy community and is now becoming a reality. They recognise the responsibility associated with their unique role. In particular they are wrestling with the inherent contradictions between some aspects of their Steiner specialism and the other public demands they will face on inspection. These are many, but are particularly evident in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum and the academy's response to the requirement to adopt national testing arrangements at age 11. They are especially aware of the need to devise a way of demonstrating pupils' progress securely. The academy remains vulnerable to failure in an inspection on any of the above aspects. Additionally, governors are not, at present, discharging their duties to promote community cohesion satisfactorily.

There is now a helpful staff appraisal system and an increasingly accurate pupil progress tracking system which rests on nationally recognised tests in reading and writing. These are useful new developments although they are not yet focussed closely enough on pupils' performance. There is also an emerging but underdeveloped approach to formal academy documentation, including the academy

development plan which shows vision but lacks any timelines, pupil targets or actions.

A new system of staff appraisal has been introduced following a pilot last year. The process involves an external assessor, peer views and self-assessment: staff find the process very helpful and one described it as 'invaluable'. However, the system for improving the quality of teaching is inconsistent, reflected by the variation in both provision and pupils' outcomes. It focuses more on individual teachers than on a systematic analysis of pupils' performance and identified needs. The newly established pupil tracking system, although helpful, now shows a significant proportion of pupils who are at risk of underachievement in some aspects of their core learning including, for example, reading. The academy recognises that converting this increasingly accurate data into appropriate action plans is not yet fully developed.

Governors are hugely committed to the success of the academy but know that they now have some significant decisions to take. A key one is to ensure that the confusion over the status of the national tests at age 11 is not repeated in 2010. There are also some administrative concerns over aspects of safeguarding. Similarly the academy needs to be certain it can operate within budget once start-up funding has been exhausted.

#### External support

The impact and level of external support is generally good with particularly strong support from the Steiner Fellowship both at a strategic level and operationally. Support from the School Improvement Partner is valued by academy staff as is the support from external agencies such as education welfare officers. There is a developing relationship with the local authority.

#### Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress. This monitoring inspection has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the academy's performance will be monitored.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- Improve levels of attendance to approach national averages.
- Clarify the status and requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage and national testing arrangements as required by the funding agreement.
- Use the data now available through the academy's new systems to improve both strategic planning and the planning of learning to raise standards and accelerate pupils' progress.

- Ensure a greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning in the middle school by improving the quality of assessment and the pace of learning.
- Review and improve some aspects of site security and safety.

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

Yours sincerely

Ceri Morgan  
Her Majesty's Inspector