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Mrs Dorothy McRae  
Headteacher  
Priory Witham Academy  
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Dear Mrs McRae

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Priory Witham Academy

## Introduction

Following my visit with Michael Smith HMI and Karen Heath, additional inspector, to your academy on 14 – 15 October 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, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher and other members of staff, groups of pupils, two members of the governing body, and the school improvement partner.

## Context

The academy opened in September 2008 with pupils from the age of three to eighteen. It currently operates on three sites, one for the Early Years Foundation Stage and infants, one for juniors and one for students of secondary age. A building programme will provide new accommodation for the secondary aged students in September 2010 and for all pupils, on the same site, from September 2011. Building works are currently on schedule. There are about 1200 pupils across the three sites. The proportions of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds and of those who speak English an additional language are well below the national average. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals and the proportion who have a statement of special educational needs are both about twice the national average. The proportion

with special educational needs and/or disabilities is also well above the national average. About four fifths of the academy's teaching staff transferred to it from predecessor schools. There are difficulties in recruiting staff to some subjects. The academy's specialisms are business and enterprise education and performing arts. The sixth form, which was very small, has grown significantly in the last year. The academy is part of a federation with two other academies, Priory Academy LSST and Priory City of Lincoln Academy.

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

Standards at the end of Key Stage 4 are improving strongly, with many indicators being above average. For example, in 2009 all students gained five or more GCSE passes at grades A\*-C. However, when English and mathematics are included, the proportion reaching this benchmark is 35%, which is significantly below average. Whilst standards in English and mathematics are improving, they are low. Although the proportion of pupils who reached the expected standard in English, mathematics and science at the end of Year 6 showed a strong improvement when compared to the predecessor school, taking the results of all Year 6 pupils into account, standards fell. Standards at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 fell in 2009 from the 2008 values and are well below average. The academy has identified that pupils make weaker progress across Key Stage 2 and has adapted the curriculum to try and ensure pupils make faster progress.

Students make good progress by the end of Year 11. This is for three main reasons. Firstly, there is a good range of courses which match students' interests and abilities, including BTEC and vocational GCSE courses. Secondly, the academy provides a great deal of support for students in the period running up to their examinations. For example, there is a wide variety of extra sessions, including residential weekends to help students with their mathematics, a suspension of the normal timetable to provide extra tuition in English and mathematics as well as extra classes after school. The third reason is that the academy has been successful in improving the attendance of its students, and this is now in line with national averages. Boys and girls make similar progress and those students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities also make similar progress to their peers.

The progress observed in lessons during the inspection was satisfactory, throughout the academy. The numbers in Year 13 last year were exceptionally small, and no generalisation can be made at this stage about progress in the sixth form.

### Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils behave sensibly and behaviour is good in the corridors and other public areas. Pupils are welcoming to visitors. There is a calm ambience around the academy. However in lessons, attitudes to learning are satisfactory rather than good. For example, questions to teachers, revealing pupils' interest and desire to further their

learning, are uncommon. Pupils say they feel safe within the school and also say that there is little bullying. They are aware of the main issues concerned with growing up. However some younger pupils are not fully aware of the dangers concerning the inappropriate use of the internet, especially social network sites. Pupils make appropriate choices with their eating and many take advantage of the wide range of extra-curricular sporting and other activities. Pupils also make a good contribution to the local community, especially in activities related to the performing arts.

### The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching is satisfactory. Of the eighteen lessons observed, seven were good, eight were satisfactory and two were inadequate. The pace of lessons is good, teachers have good subject knowledge and their relationships with students are good. There are two principal reasons why teaching is not better than satisfactory. There is often very little assessment of how well pupils are learning during lessons. This means that teachers are not always aware of when they may need to modify their approach or to explain something again. In one lesson, students were researching two quite complex ideas from the internet, but all of those who were spoken to by the inspector had misunderstood the work. This had not been picked upon by the teacher and responded to. Insufficient emphasis is also paid to the development of literacy in lessons, and given that students' standards in literacy are low, this is a serious omission. Pupils are aware of their targets and how close they are to achieving them. However, the marking of their work is not consistent enough in advising them how to go about making the progress they need. While some marking is admirably detailed and helpful, some is merely perfunctory.

The Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 provide a welcoming and stimulating environment. There are good opportunities for children to access all areas of learning in the Foundation Stage. Children are well supported because adults re-enforce learning and model appropriate language well. Consequently children make good progress in this area of the curriculum.

Pupils in Key Stage 1 and Years 3 and 4, follow a curriculum which integrates different subjects. This is successful in bringing about coherence in topics studied. The curriculum is enriched by the use of a wide variety of different stimuli to engage pupils. In the secondary phase, students are able to study a wide variety of courses. Motivation is enhanced by their sitting some of their GCSE examinations at times earlier than Year 11. A good number of subjects are available to students in the sixth form. While these are predominantly vocational subjects, students have access to more traditional courses offered by the other academies in the federation.

The business enterprise and performing arts specialisms make a good contribution to the overall effectiveness of the academy. The targets for attainment in the participating subjects, and for the uptake of those subjects, have been achieved.

Students develop a good understanding of work-related issues. In one good business education lesson, students were quick to interpret the range of body language which could be displayed by potential customers, and how best to respond to it. Performing arts has helped to develop teaching approaches, such as role play which, when observed during the inspection, were used well. In addition, many pupils learn to play a musical instrument or take part in school productions.

Pastoral care is good: pupils are well supported. Good support is given by an independent social worker to pupils and parents in need. This includes home visits and working with pupils who may otherwise fail to attend school or complete their education. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities receive the support they need and work is progressing to ensure a more coherent approach to special educational needs across all phases within the academy.

### The effectiveness of leadership and management

The academy's senior leaders demonstrate a strong ambition for improvement, particularly for those students reaching the end of statutory education. Effective steps are taken to ensure that students have every opportunity to succeed in their external examinations in Years 10 and 11. However, there is too much variation in the approaches used for different age groups. For example, in Key Stage 4 there is very thorough assessment and tracking of students' progress, along with analysis of their subsequent examination performance. This approach is in its infancy for younger pupils where the academy's leaders judge that children start Reception with skills and aptitudes below those usually seen for children of this age. At present the analysis of attainment records is in the process of development and is currently not sufficiently advanced to verify this judgment. The academy's leaders are aware of inconsistencies in the use of data and they are being attended to.

Subject leaders monitor the quality of teaching and learning, scrutinise pupils' work and evaluate the work of their departments. While this is done relatively frequently, it is carried out with an insufficiently strong emphasis on learning. This leads to a more positive evaluation of performance than is justified and so does not clearly identify areas for improvement. In addition, the plans for improvement rarely have any measurable targets or indications of what improvements should have been made by part way through the year. This makes leaders' and governors' task in assessing whether adequate progress has been made, or whether more resources need to be provided, very difficult. Leaders meet with their managers reasonably frequently. The nature of the meetings and the extent to which leaders are held to account are, however, too variable.

The academy's capacity for improvement is satisfactory, as demonstrated by the improvements that have been made so far.

## External support

The federation of which the academy is a part provides good support. This includes providing some sixth form teaching thus enabling a broad curriculum to exist in the sixth form. Some teachers and support staff are shared across the federation, as is the deployment of advanced skills teachers and other means to develop teaching quality further. Governors strongly support the academy and are well aware of the progress being made, for example in external examinations. They are well involved in ensuring that challenging targets are set. They do not as yet have any formal means of capturing the views of parents, staff and pupils. The school improvement partner provides valued support, not least in identifying sources of revenue.

## Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

## Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards further by developing the quality of teaching and learning, particularly by:
  - ensuring that teachers assess pupils' understanding during lessons so that they can respond where there are problems
  - ensuring that strategies for developing pupils' literacy skills are adopted in lessons
- Ensure that the monitoring and evaluation of the work of the academy focuses, across all key stages, on pupils' learning and that the plans for improvement include measurable targets, the progress towards which can be monitored at regular intervals.

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

Alan Alder  
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors  
the Academies Group, DCSF [ [Paul.hann@dczf.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Paul.hann@dczf.gsi.gov.uk) ]