

Spires Academy

Inspection report

Unique Reference Number	135305
Local Authority	N/A
Inspection number	348855
Inspection dates	19–20 May 2010
Reporting inspector	Emma Ing HMI

This inspection of the school was carried out under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.

Type of school	Academy
School category	Non-maintained
Age range of pupils	11–16
Gender of pupils	Mixed
Number of pupils on the school roll	430
Appropriate authority	The governing body
Chair	Mr Jerry Pack
Headteacher	Helen Foster, Academy Leader
Date of previous school inspection	Not previously inspected
School address	Bredlands Lane Sturry Canterbury
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Introduction

This inspection was carried out by two of Her Majesty's Inspectors and two additional inspectors. Twenty eight lessons or part lessons were observed and 24 teachers seen; meetings were held with groups of students, the trustees and groups of staff. Inspectors observed the school's work and looked at the academy's raising achievement plan, school improvement plan, staff and student bulletins, tracking data and policies. The case notes about additional support given to several students were examined. Sixty one parental questionnaires, 42 staff questionnaires and 97 pupil questionnaires were returned to the team and these were carefully considered.

The inspection team reviewed many aspects of the school's work. It looked in detail at the following:

- the attainment and progress of students in mathematics, science and English
- the impact of the academy's work to develop basic skills, emotional literacy and employability on all groups
- the role of middle and senior leaders in driving improvement
- the extent to which the curriculum meets the needs of all students.

Information about the school

Spires Academy opened in September 2007 on the site of a predecessor school. It was subject to a monitoring visit by Ofsted in July 2009. An acting Academy Leader, working to the Executive Principal, was appointed last summer and recently accepted the substantive Academy Leader post. There has been a significant amount of staff turnover this year, but a full complement of staff has been appointed for September 2010. The academy has specialist status in business and enterprise, and in the performing and creative arts. It is still housed in the predecessor school buildings but there are plans to build new accommodation. Spires has strong links with Marlowe Academy, whose leader is the Executive Principal of Spires Academy.

Spires Academy is a small secondary school, but student numbers are increasing. Around 15 students are looked after by the local authority. A very few students are from minority ethnic backgrounds and a few speak English as an additional language. A high proportion of students has special educational needs and/or disabilities. These are varied but include significant groups with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder and learning difficulties. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is high.

Inspection grades: 1 is outstanding, 2 is good, 3 is satisfactory, and 4 is inadequate

Please turn to the glossary for a description of the grades and inspection terms

Inspection judgements

Overall effectiveness: how good is the school?

3

The school's capacity for sustained improvement

2

Main findings

Spires Academy offers a satisfactory and rapidly improving education. Since the monitoring visit, less than a year ago, a great deal of work has been done leading to significant improvements in:

- the progress made by students
- students' confidence and engagement with the academy
- students' attendance
- the quality of teaching
- the quality of food served in the dining hall.

The Academy Leader leads with vision, dynamism and passion. She is well supported by the Executive Principal and the trustees. Staff share the academy vision and are confident in their own roles. Leaders are very clear about the strengths of the academy and the work to be done; senior leaders' self-evaluation is thorough and accurate. Although current middle leaders have not been sufficiently pro-active in leadership, new middle leadership roles have been created for September 2010 and these staff are enthusiastic about their new roles in meeting pressing objectives. Most students now feel proud of their school, and this is reflected in their smart uniforms and much improved presentation of their work. In most lessons, they are focussed on their learning with evident enjoyment. For these reasons, the academy's capacity to sustain improvement is good.

Students at Spires are currently making good progress from low starting points. Their attainment is now broadly in line with national averages. The curriculum meets students' needs well, developing literacy and offering a good range of option choices for them from the age of 14. The support and guidance units offer very high quality support to students who need specialist support and help. Staff are creative in seeking to remove barriers to learning and to develop programmes which are tailored to individual needs, enabling students to make consistently good progress.

Parents are generally supportive of the academy and pleased with the education it offers, although some express concerns about staff turnover. The academy has not yet managed to involve all parents, especially those do not particularly value education or are facing difficult challenges in their own lives, in an active partnership to support their children.

Since the monitoring visit, the quality of teaching in lessons taught by established staff has come on in leaps and bounds. There are now outstanding and good lessons taught consistently in many subjects. However, staff turnover has led to some patchiness in teaching. In addition, too few teachers use both assessment and the high quality

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diagnoses and advice offered by the support and guidance unit to make sure that, within their lessons, they are meeting the individual needs of students.

What does the school need to do to improve further?

- Further improve the progress made by students by making sure that all teachers:
 - carefully assess students' work, both in lessons and in their exercise books
 - systematically use assessment information to match their teaching and the work set to the individual learning needs of students
 - follow the guidance given by the support and guidance unit in relation to the specific needs of individuals within each class.
- Find ways of involving all parents, and especially those who are not naturally supportive of the academy, more fully in their children's education.
- Ensure consistency across the work of the academy by empowering the new middle leaders to take an active role in leading, monitoring and evaluating practice within their remit.
- About 40% of the schools whose overall effectiveness is judged satisfactory may receive a monitoring visit by an Ofsted inspector before their next section 5 inspection.

Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils**3**

Students' attendance has improved significantly over the last year and is now in line with the national average. In most, but not all lessons, students' behaviour is good. They arrive ready to learn, engage well with the tasks set and genuinely enjoy their work. Around the academy, similarly, most of the behaviour is good, but students report that some falls short of this, a view which inspectors found to be accurate.

Several students expressed the view that the best thing about the academy is that 'most teachers make lessons fun'. Across the academy, students are confident that they know how well they are doing. In some subjects they have learned to assess their own work well and, except in a few cases, they demonstrate commitment to doing their very best. These attitudes are an important factor in ensuring that they are catching up well with their literacy skills, presenting their work well and making good progress in their learning. The progress made by students in English, mathematics and science, which has been poor in the past, is now back on track, with significant amounts of additional literacy teaching taking place across the curriculum. Attainment in these subjects, and therefore overall, is now securely in line with that found nationally.

The progress, well-being and engagement of those students whose circumstances make them vulnerable, or who are experiencing difficulty in managing their behaviour or learning, are closely monitored. Extra emotional and academic support is given, and sometimes different opportunities are made available, which enable them to make good progress and enjoy their learning too. Many students are responding very well to the academy's efforts to engage them and raise their aspirations. One parent commented

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that, as a result of the work of the academy, 'My two children now have aspirations to attend college, they have grown much more confident... and they engage fully with the notion that education is good for them.' Overall, students are making good strides in developing those skills and qualities which will enable them to participate fully in the world of work.

Students appreciate the sense of community within the academy, and relationships between them and the staff are excellent. Spiralz, the academy cafe, offers breakfast and an informal place for adults and young people to meet and chat. Increasing numbers of students are involved in supporting the leadership of the school by contributing their views on important issues, such as teaching and learning, the homework policy, the rewards system and making the environment safe. A few younger students express concern about bullying, although they acknowledge that these are dealt with promptly by staff.

These are the grades for pupils' outcomes

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning	2
Taking into account: Pupils' attainment ¹	3
The quality of pupils' learning and their progress	2
The quality of learning for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities and their progress	2
The extent to which pupils feel safe	3
Pupils' behaviour	3
The extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles	2
The extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community	2
The extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being	3
Taking into account: Pupils' attendance ¹	3
The extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	3

How effective is the provision?

There is much good and some outstanding teaching at the academy, but staff turnover

¹ The grades for attainment and attendance are: 1 is high; 2 is above average; 3 is broadly average; and 4 is low.

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has meant that there has not been enough opportunity to consolidate the expertise of all staff to ensure consistently good practice. In particular, in planning their lessons teachers are not always sufficiently clear about the different learning needs of individual students.

The flexible and wide-ranging curriculum has been an important factor in securing the good achievement of students. Staff at the academy have worked well in partnership with a wide range of other providers to develop a curriculum that enables the individual needs, interests and aspirations of students to be well met.

Older students are very happy with the wide range of courses and qualifications which include BTECs, GCSEs, diplomas and college courses. An exciting range of enrichment activities are offered both as trips during the academy day and after school. Students have participated in many external events such as 'World War Two Day', 'Young Dragons', 'Radiowaves - radio broadcasting' and 'Battle of the Bands'. In addition specific activities, such as horse riding and Challenger Troop, which develops team skills and confidence building, are offered to students as part of their individualised support. Care has been taken to ensure that the needs of those with less than average literacy skills can be met. The provision for the performing arts is a strength of the academy and contributes well to the cultural development of students. Plans are in place to further develop the provision for business and enterprise which is currently being covered satisfactorily.

The work of the support and guidance unit is well organised, with good systems and close cooperation with external agencies to support the learning and development of identified students. As a result of partnership working with Marlowe Academy, it has been possible to employ staff with a range of highly specific expertise and this is well used. These staff demonstrate a genuine commitment to overcoming barriers to learning and, as a result, there are striking examples of how they have helped vulnerable individuals improve their behaviour, attitudes and learning. However, in lessons this good work is not always followed up with appropriate support for individuals. Leaders have rightly recognised that there is more to be done to ensure that those who are at the early stages of learning English as an additional language or who are advanced bilingual learners are well supported. The academy has developed good transition support schemes for those joining the school but guidance for older students about their option choices and beyond is underdeveloped.

These are the grades for the quality of provision

The quality of teaching	3
Taking into account: The use of assessment to support learning	3
The extent to which the curriculum meets pupils' needs, including, where relevant, through partnerships	2
The effectiveness of care, guidance and support	3

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How effective are leadership and management?

The Executive Principal and Academy Leader, working with the trustees, staff and students, have together forged a vision and created a climate in which staff feel valued, involved and positive about the future of the academy. A great deal of work has been done over the past year to secure crucial improvements in outcomes for students and establish an ethos of high expectations, underpinned by good levels of support. Challenging targets are set at all levels and everyone knows the role they are to play to ensure success. The trustees are committed and passionate; they bring expertise and insight, and hold the academy to account well. The academy works effectively in partnership with Marlowe Academy and also with different support agencies and education providers to secure a wide range of opportunities for its students and value for money.

The well-being of students is central to the thinking of academy staff. Safeguarding procedures in the academy are robust. Policies and risk assessments are in place and staff are well trained. Although much of what is done at the academy is about tackling the discrimination and barriers experienced by the most vulnerable in its community, the evaluation of the impact of the academy's work in this area is underdeveloped. Students are consulted well, but this is yet to extend to parents and the wider community. Furthermore, the academy has not yet found ways of promoting students' understanding of cultural diversity. There is good promotion of community cohesion within the academy and leaders have a good understanding of the local community. A start has been made to the development of the community beyond the academy, for example through work in primary schools, but this is not yet well developed.

These are the grades for leadership and management

The effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement	2
Taking into account: The leadership and management of teaching and learning	2
The effectiveness of the governing body in challenging and supporting the school so that weaknesses are tackled decisively and statutory responsibilities met	2
The effectiveness of the school's engagement with parents and carers	3
The effectiveness of partnerships in promoting learning and well-being	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes equality of opportunity and tackles discrimination	3
The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures	2
The effectiveness with which the school promotes community cohesion	3

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The effectiveness with which the school deploys resources to achieve value for money	3
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Views of parents and carers

A very small minority of parents and carers returned questionnaires. These were generally very positive about the academy, with 89% agreeing with the statement that, 'Overall I am happy with my child's experience at this school'. Parents were overwhelmingly of the view that their children enjoy school and confident that their children are making good progress. Of those that added comments to their questionnaires, several referred to the excellent support that the school had given their child; others said that support for children who experienced bullying had been good, although one did not feel that to be case. One parent commented on the poor quality of food available at lunchtime, a view with which inspectors do not agree. Several parents commented on the negative impact that staff turnover has had on the quality of teaching and the curriculum. Inspectors found this to be an accurate observation, although the curriculum is now good and teaching is satisfactory and improving significantly.

Responses from parents and carers to Ofsted's questionnaire

Ofsted invited all the registered parents and carers of pupils registered at Spires Academy to complete a questionnaire about their views of the school.

In the questionnaire, parents and carers were asked to record how strongly they agreed with 13 statements about the school. The inspection team received 61 completed questionnaires by the end of the on-site inspection. In total, there are 430 pupils registered at the school.

Statements	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
My child enjoys school	24	40	30	50	3	5	1	2
The school keeps my child safe	25	42	32	53	2	3	1	2
The school informs me about my child's progress	36	60	23	38	1	2	0	0
My child is making enough progress at this school	24	40	30	50	5	8	1	2
The teaching is good at this school	17	28	38	63	2	3	3	5
The school helps me to support my child's learning	23	38	29	48	4	7	2	3
The school helps my child to have a healthy lifestyle	12	20	40	67	4	7	1	2
The school makes sure that my child is well prepared for the future (for example changing year group, changing school, and for children who are finishing school, entering further or higher education, or entering employment)	15	25	32	53	5	8	3	5
The school meets my child's particular needs	20	33	30	50	6	10	2	3
The school deals effectively with unacceptable behaviour	19	32	32	53	5	8	3	5
The school takes account of my suggestions and concerns	15	25	31	52	5	8	4	7
The school is led and managed effectively	18	30	32	53	2	3	3	5
Overall, I am happy with my child's experience at this school	25	42	29	48	3	5	2	3

The table above summarises the responses that parents and carers made to each statement. The percentages indicate the proportion of parents and carers giving that response out of the total number of completed questionnaires. Where one or more parents and carers chose not to answer a particular question, the percentages will not add up to 100%.

Glossary

What inspection judgements mean

Grade	Judgement	Description
Grade 1	Outstanding	These features are highly effective. An outstanding school provides exceptionally well for its pupils' needs.
Grade 2	Good	These are very positive features of a school. A school that is good is serving its pupils well.
Grade 3	Satisfactory	These features are of reasonable quality. A satisfactory school is providing adequately for its pupils.
Grade 4	Inadequate	These features are not of an acceptable standard. An inadequate school needs to make significant improvement in order to meet the needs of its pupils. Ofsted inspectors will make further visits until it improves.

Overall effectiveness of schools

Type of school	Overall effectiveness judgement (percentage of schools)			
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate
Nursery schools	51	45	0	4
Primary schools	6	41	42	10
Secondary schools	8	34	44	14
Sixth forms	10	37	50	3
Special schools	32	38	25	5
Pupil referral units	12	43	31	14
All schools	9	40	40	10

New school inspection arrangements were introduced on 1 September 2009. This means that inspectors now make some additional judgements that were not made previously.

The data in the table above is for the period 1 September to 31 December 2009 and is the most recently published data available (see www.ofsted.gov.uk). Please note that the sample of schools inspected during the autumn term 2009 was not representative of all schools nationally, as weaker schools are inspected more frequently than good or outstanding schools.

Percentages are rounded and do not always add exactly to 100. Secondary school figures include those that have sixth forms, and sixth form figures include only the data specifically for sixth form inspection judgements.

Common terminology used by inspectors

Achievement:	the progress and success of a pupil in their learning, development or training.
Attainment:	the standard of the pupils' work shown by test and examination results and in lessons.
Capacity to improve:	the proven ability of the school to continue improving. Inspectors base this judgement on what the school has accomplished so far and on the quality of its systems to maintain improvement.
Leadership and management:	the contribution of all the staff with responsibilities, not just the headteacher, to identifying priorities, directing and motivating staff and running the school.
Learning:	how well pupils acquire knowledge, develop their understanding, learn and practise skills and are developing their competence as learners.
Overall effectiveness:	<p>inspectors form a judgement on a school's overall effectiveness based on the findings from their inspection of the school. The following judgements, in particular, influence what the overall effectiveness judgement will be.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The school's capacity for sustained improvement.■ Outcomes for individuals and groups of pupils.■ The quality of teaching.■ The extent to which the curriculum meets pupil's needs, including where relevant, through partnerships.■ The effectiveness of care, guidance and support.
Progress:	the rate at which pupils are learning in lessons and over longer periods of time. It is often measured by comparing the pupils' attainment at the end of a key stage with their attainment when they started.

This letter is provided for the school, parents and carers to share with their children. It describes Ofsted's main findings from the inspection of their school.



21 May 2010

Dear Students

Inspection of Spires Academy, Canterbury, CT2 0HD

It was a great pleasure to return to your academy as lead inspector of your recent Ofsted inspection. Thank you for your courtesy and welcome. Many of you spoke to me or one of the other inspectors, and we wish to thank you for sharing your views with us and telling us about your lives and work at the academy. You will, of course, want to know what we thought! I hope that many of you will find the time to read the full report, which can be found on our Ofsted website (www.ofsted.gov.uk) but I shall set out below a brief summary.

The academy has moved on a long way since last summer and is set to improve further. You are making good progress with your work and are now at least in line with national averages in all your subjects. Your attendance is much improved too, and is now average. Most important, you are enjoying lessons much more and, in most of them, you are really getting on with your work and trying your best. The curriculum is broad and well suited to your interests and abilities. The support and guidance centre works very effectively with individual students to help them keep up and make the best of their time at Spires. We have suggested though that the academy does more to engage and involve your parents. Your Academy Leader and the Executive Principal are offering strong leadership and everyone knows what they need to do to secure further improvements.

We agree with those of you that commented that many of your lessons are fun, and teaching certainly is improving. We have asked the academy to work some more on teaching and, in particular, on making sure that teachers use assessment and, in some cases, the advice of the support and guidance centre. This will help them make sure that their teaching is tightly focussed on the learning needs of all the individuals in any class. We also asked that middle leaders are supported to take a full leadership role. Although we saw mostly good behaviour in and between lessons, we agreed with those of you who told us that not everyone's behaviour is good all the time. I urge you all to work on this in partnership with the staff of the academy as it will make the academy a better place to learn.

I look forward to hearing great things about Spires and Spires 'old girls and boys' in the

future.

Yours sincerely

Emma Ing

Her Majesty's Inspector

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