

Serco Inspections
Boundary House
2 Wythall Green Way
Middle Lane
BIRMINGHAM
West Midlands
B47 6LW

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms Terrie Askew
Harris Academy Falconwood
The Green
Welling
DA16 2PE

Dear Ms Askew

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Harris Academy Falconwood

Introduction

Following my visit with Gill Close HMI to your academy on 19 and 20 May 2010, 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 principal, academy staff, groups of students, the chief executive of the federation and spoke by telephone to the School Improvement Partner.

Context

The majority of subject leaders are new in post. Many of the appointments were made in September 2009. The academy's sixth form came into operation in September 2009. Construction of the new purpose-built academy is well underway; the new building is scheduled to be completed by September 2011.

The academy is in an area served by selective grammar schools. The academy's specialisms are enterprise, science and sport. There are 759 students on roll, with a higher than average proportion of students of White British heritage. The proportion of students who speak a language other than English as their home language is significantly lower than average. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is also lower than to be expected nationally. There is a lower than average proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals.



The proportion of students who start or leave the school other than at the beginning or the end of the year is significantly lower than the national rate. The academy has had particular difficulties in recruiting mathematics and science teachers, although staffing levels in these subjects are starting to stabilise.

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

The academy has taken excellent strides to improve students' levels of attainment. In 2009, the proportion of students who gained five or more good grades at GCSE was 92%. The proportion of students who achieved five or more A* to C grades including mathematics and English also significantly improved to 42% closing the gap on the national figure exceedingly well. The academy is set to better this in 2010; its data predict that the proportion of students who will gain GCSE passes in mathematics and English is set to rise. In 2009, girls did not achieve as well as boys. The impact of clear, decisive actions by leaders show in the academy's predictions that girls will achieve as well as boys in 2010. One of the school's specialisms of science, where students previously did not perform as well, is now predicting a modest improvement in students' attainment in 2010. High pass rates are also predicted for physical education. In Key Stage 3 standards are predicted to be broadly similar to those of the previous year. The progress students make in English and mathematics by the end of Year 11 is set to rise, although higher attaining students do not make as much progress as their peers.

In the better lessons observed by inspectors, students worked well in groups. They particularly enjoyed their learning where teachers allowed them to make an active contribution to lessons and they were given a variety of tasks that challenged them. In some lessons there was good use of peer and self-assessment to enable students to understand the level of attainment they had achieved. Inspectors did observe some low-level disruption when students sat for too long listening to the teacher and were not actively engaged in their learning.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students are of the view that they feel safe, and that behaviour has improved in the last two years. A few students said that they felt that poor behaviour was not always addressed quickly. The level of students' attendance has improved significantly, and the proportion of students who are persistently absent from school has fallen considerably. Some students welcomed being a part of the Harris Federation's Students' Commission which enables them to appraise the effectiveness of teaching in the academy. This is at the early stages of development.

The effectiveness of provision

All teaching observed by inspectors was at least satisfactory, although no outstanding lessons were seen. In the good lessons, teachers used effective

strategies to ensure that the pace of students' learning was fast. In these lessons, teachers used group work well to develop students' learning. There were some good examples of marked work, where teachers awarded grades for presentation, effort and attainment and used detailed marking to enable students to know precisely what they needed to do to improve. In some lessons students were given good opportunities to develop effective problem-solving skills. In a few of the weaker lessons, teachers talked for too long, limiting the time students had to complete the tasks set or learn independently. In some lessons, teachers did not assess their students' depth of understanding well enough to identify whether they had made progress in their learning. The quality of marked work is variable within subjects and across the academy.

The academy has made effective progress in developing a suitable curriculum for its students. The focus on improving students' levels of literacy has resulted in a variety of good strategies which include; a discrete literacy lesson for students in Key Stage 3, weekly literacy tutorials for all students and targeted support for students not achieving as well as they should. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of these measures. There is now an increased vocational programme for students in Key Stage 4 and a more balanced curriculum in sport that enables boys to participate in dance as well as more traditional options. These additions are working well and students are appreciative of the variety of sports they can take. There has been good impact of the measures implemented to improve behaviour and attendance, and to reduce the proportion of students who are persistently absent.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The principal and senior leaders have made excellent progress in a short space of time in embedding a culture where staff want to give their best. Leadership actions have had a significantly positive impact on the improved achievement, behaviour and attendance of students. They are not resting on their laurels; leaders know what they need to do next to sustain or improve the outcomes for students. The principal and senior team are also managing the transition to the new building extremely well. Leaders' self-evaluation is robust, although a few aspects seem to be what the academy is aspiring to rather than based on its present performance. For example, swift actions were taken to appoint the new subject leaders; however the quality of self-evaluation at middle leadership level is not sharp enough to bring about improvements in key aspects of the academy's work. Leaders and managers have quickly reduced the amount of unsatisfactory lessons and have put in place interventions to improve weaker teaching. However, they recognise that there is more work to be done to increase the proportion of good or outstanding lessons and that there needs to be more attention paid to the impact of the individual support given to teachers to improve their practice. The number of student applications for the sixth form is set to rise for September 2010. Although the curriculum provision is

small it is appropriate at this stage of the academy's development. A more extensive curriculum is planned for when the move to the new building is completed.

External support

Support from the Harris Federation of Academies has been highly effective. It has provided rapid responses to the academy's needs for additional teachers, finance and information communication technology issues. The academy is also well-supported in its building programme by the federation's project manager. Funding from the National Challenge has enabled the academy to provide a one-week team building residential programme for Key Stage 4 students who found the experience extremely useful. The continued challenge and support from the School Improvement Partner has enabled senior leaders to evaluate the academy's performance well.

Main Judgements

The academy has made outstanding progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Senior and middle leaders to focus more sharply on areas for development and plan more precisely for improvement.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of Governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Samantha Morgan-Price
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of Governors
the Academies Group, Department for Education