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Ms Venessa Willms
Primary Headteacher
King Solomon Academy
Penfold Street
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Dear Ms Willms

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to King Solomon Academy

Following my visit with Kekshan Salaria, HMI to your academy on 10 and 11 December 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

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

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, senior and support staff, groups of pupils and parents, and the chair of governors.

Context

King Solomon Academy opened in September 2007 as an all-through school for 3–18-year-olds. The academy is operating in temporary accommodation on the same site where the new and permanent buildings are currently under construction. The new building will be completed in September 2009. The first phase of the academy opened with two Reception classes and, as the numbers of pupils increase each year, it will eventually have an intake of 870, with two classes to each year group in the primary and secondary phase, including a sixth form.

The academy opened with 22 pupils on roll. There are now 101 pupils, with slightly more girls than boys. Since opening, the number of pupils joining the academy other than at the normal time has been high. The pupil population is now largely stable

and the academy is over-subscribed. The academy serves the immediate local community. Most of the pupils are from diverse minority ethnic groups; the largest single groups are of White British, Black Caribbean, Other White and all other mixed backgrounds. Over two-thirds of pupils speak a language other than English, with the majority at an early or intermediate stage of learning to speak English as an additional language. All of these figures are well above the national average. About a quarter of pupils have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, which is higher than the national average, and more boys than girls have a special educational need. Of these pupils, 45% have behavioural, emotional and/or social difficulties and 3.2% have statements of special educational needs.

Following the opening, key senior staff and class teachers were appointed to the Reception class and Year 1. A staffing structure tailored to the needs of the academy is fully in place. Within a year of opening, two teachers and a midday meal supervisor left the academy because of personal reasons. The academy is fully staffed with a good balance of experienced and newly qualified teachers.

The academy is sponsored through Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), a charitable organisation, and as such is part of the family of ARK schools that were set up in 2004 to increase the life chances of pupils in the most challenging areas of Britain. The academy is structured on a small-school model with a two-form entry. Its specialisms are in mathematics and music. The academy gained the Intermediate International School Award in 2007 and aims to achieve the full international award this academic year.

Achievement and standards

Pupils start in the Reception class with skills, knowledge and understanding that are below those expected for their age. They are taught very well and, by the time they reach Year 1, their basic skills are well above expectations in communication, language and literacy, and mathematical development. Pupils make outstanding progress because of the very good balance of activities that are teacher-led or independently chosen. All of this provides valuable opportunities to develop independent learning skills. Valuable links with parents, beginning with home visits, help pupils to settle quickly, become familiar with the routines and develop confidence. All groups of pupils, including those learning English as an additional language and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, make similar progress to their peers. The academy has very good systems to support pupils who have been identified as underachieving. The workbooks from the current Year 1 class show good and often very good progress overall. Pupils are likely to meet the very challenging targets set for them at the end of Key Stage 1. Pupils' progress is consistently good or better in all lessons.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils enjoy attending the academy. This is apparent in the manner in which they join in all activities and in their enthusiasm for learning. They work hard in lessons, persevere with difficult tasks and cooperate well with each other. These strengths lead to the high standards they achieve and prepare them well for the next stage of their learning. A strong sense of community is fostered in assemblies which celebrate the achievements of all pupils. The school council plays an important role in the life of the academy. Pupils' use of the election process, which involves them in selecting class representatives, gives them an early understanding of how democracy works.

Pupils' behaviour is excellent, reflecting the academy's high expectations of work and behaviour. Their listening is often impressive when they are being given instructions. Attendance, although in line with the national average, is improving and there are strong structures and systems to ensure that it improves further. For instance, certificates are used to reward good attendance but, despite these efforts, a small minority of parents are not ensuring that their children attend the academy regularly; fluctuation in attendance is also linked to religious holidays and childhood illnesses.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching is good, with a number of outstanding features. Despite the staff turnover and relatively high mobility of pupils, the strengths in teaching have been sustained. This is because work is adapted well and the curriculum is adjusted regularly to support the newcomers who are either at the early stage of learning English or might have low basic skills on entry. Scrutiny of pupils' books, discussion with them and observation of lessons indicate that, despite the low starting points of new entrants, the consistently good teaching is helping them to achieve very well. The high level of support, focused attention on basic skills, high expectations and the very positive attitudes of pupils combine to ensure very good progress.

Lessons are well planned and purposeful, and teachers' creative approach holds pupils' attention very well. A range of teaching approaches are used and carefully linked to clear learning outcomes and well-matched resources so that teachers can bring the best out of pupils and involve all of them in lessons, including those at the early stage of learning English.

Several features support the effectiveness of teaching and learning very well. First, the foremost pillar of the academy's aim, to instil high expectations of behaviour and high aspirations of teaching, ensures that there is a strong focus on learning rather than teaching. Work and resources are therefore well matched to needs and pupils are encouraged to work independently and to intervene with questions to increase their thinking. Second, there is very good use of assessment information which

teachers use to identify weaknesses in learning so that gaps are filled and pupils who are likely to fall behind can receive the support needed. Third, there is very good support for pupils. Teaching assistants provide intensive individual support for pupils at the early stage of learning English as well as for those with a learning difficulty or disability. The high ratio of staff to pupils when the academy opened helped to support learning well, and pupils were given intensive support. Although the roll has increased, the level of high quality support remains.

Pupils are beginning to take part in evaluating their own progress and plans are in place to develop self-assessment further using the traffic lights system. The quality of marking is good and supportive of improving pupils' basic skills. The academy recognises that there is still more work to do on marking and self-assessment.

The curriculum is broad and balanced, with a strong focus on key skills, taught in a longer than typical school day. The length of the day and the sustained emphasis on literacy and numeracy are the key factors to pupils making outstanding progress in their learning. The curriculum is regularly reviewed and adapted as the academy continues to grow. Throughout the academy, pupils enjoy learning because the curriculum is brought alive by the use of practical and engaging activities. Very good links with a number of organisations and schools help to enhance the pupils' experiences within and beyond the local community. Other aspects of the curriculum are enriched through the use of subject specialists, especially in areas such as physical education and music. Pupils and parents value the extra-curricular provision, which includes a range of clubs. The outstanding standards achieved by the pupils reflect the academy's high expectations and its commitment to providing a rich, yet flexible and broad curriculum that meets the needs of all its pupils.

The quality of care, guidance and support is exceptionally good. Assessment information is used very well to identify and plan the right support for individual pupils and to build on their strengths. For example, robust assessment before and after pupils enter the academy is helping teachers to provide targeted support for individuals or groups of pupils very well, including those who are identified as gifted and talented, those with a special need or those learning English as an additional language. Assessment information is used to set very challenging whole-school targets which are shared with governors. Performance information, derived from the six-weekly cycle of testing is discussed with parents who say they are very well informed about their children's targets. Pupils are safe and all safeguarding requirements are fully met. Minor incidents of bullying or racism are rare and the academy has very good systems to tackle these issues efficiently.

Leadership and management

The headteacher's leadership is highly effective. She is well supported by the assistant headteacher and the new numeracy coordinator. The headteacher has worked very closely with the sponsor and ARK leaders to articulate the mission

statement of high achievement for all, irrespective of pupils' backgrounds or starting points. As such, leaders and managers have successfully embedded the motto 'Depth to enable breadth' into the five principal aims or pillars of the academy: high achievement, exceptional standards in literacy, strong partnership work with parents and the community, developing life skills and self-development, and providing a relevant and enriched curriculum.

The headteacher has steered and supported staff and parents very well into accepting and understanding the vision for the academy. As a result, there is commitment to sustaining the impetus of improvement and moving the academy forward. For example, leaders have balanced the demands of starting a new school and maintaining the momentum of improvement within a confined space while the new building is under construction on the same site. Morale is high and one of the main strengths of the academy lies in the teamwork among the teachers and support staff; for example, there is a culture of monitoring each other's work, joint planning, mentoring and sharing good practice.

Since the opening of the academy, the policies and the development plan have clearly focused on short-term goals which will eventually have an impact on longer-term plans. Planning is highly focused and identifies priorities for development with outcomes that are measurable. Self-evaluation is accurate. Careful monitoring of lessons shows where the strengths and weaknesses are in teaching and is backed up by comprehensive training and support for all staff. The strong focus on literacy and numeracy has laid a sure foundation to accelerate pupils' progress. There is very good investment in providing training and developing the skills of staff internally. For instance, steps have been taken to develop the management skills of the coordinators for English and mathematics. Although the academy is still relatively new and small, clear systems are in place to monitor and assess pupils' progress. Already, intervention programmes are used to begin preparing pupils and parents for the transition to the academy where there is an unremitting drive to help learners achieve their potential. Effective interventions include planning and organising curriculum workshops for parents, identifying barriers to achievement, and setting up the nurture group and working with nursery and feeder schools. The academy is very well placed to drive improvement.

The significant minority but representative group of parents spoken to are overwhelmingly supportive of the academy's work with their children. They appreciate the way their children are enabled to settle quickly, and how active and occupied they are in their learning. Parents said it was 'amazing', and that they were 'lucky' to be a part of the academy. Parents like the small-school model, the curriculum, the focused teaching and emphasis on high achievement, and the inclusive approach, all of which underpin the academy's work. They view the accelerated progress of their children as exceptional. The comment from one parent sums up their views about the academy: 'Children are enjoying it ... my child has improved greatly, I can't describe it – it is huge, I mean it's gigantic ... and the

school is transparent, parents are involved, it is team work.' A strong community spirit pervades the academy and is evident in the staffing which is representative of the community.

The local governing body is very well informed and fulfils its statutory duties well. Members perform different roles, are representative of the academy's community and act as effective role models. Governors are very aware of value for money, and hold the school to account by monitoring the progress and overall effectiveness of the provision as they compare performance and the development plan to similar schools and local authorities.

External support

The academy works very well with the sponsor and ARK. The regular and hard-hitting reviews provide clear points for development, focusing particularly on achievement and standards, the overall effectiveness of the academy and the priorities for future development. ARK provides excellent support for the academy in two ways. First, it handles all administrative matters which allows the senior team and staff to devote their time to the core aim of the academy, raising standards. Second, the educational director of ARK acts as a mentor to the headteacher. This high level of support has had a significant impact on the day-to-day running of the academy, as the headteacher uses the expertise and advice well to improve provision. For example, recommendations to improve professional development and teaching and learning were acted on swiftly. The actions taken led to closer monitoring and working on the next steps for improvement. Changes made have had a significant impact on accelerating pupils' progress as they are consistently exposed to satisfactory or better teaching.

Close partnership working with the local authority on moderating judgements, planning and professional development is helping the academy to develop a reliable source of judgements on its strengths and what it needs do to move forward.

The academy has made outstanding progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Build on the leadership and management skills of the coordinators.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF.

Yours sincerely

Carmen Rodney
H M Inspector