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Mr Brunton
Principal
City Academy Norwich
Earlham Road
Norwich
NR4 7NU

Dear Mr Brunton

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of City Academy Norwich

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 20 - 21 October 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection 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 and other members of staff, groups of students. They spoke by telephone with the Chair of the Governing Body, who is also a representative of the sponsors.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009 with students aged 11 to 18. Building work on new accommodation to house the academy will begin in 2011. The Principal transferred from the predecessor school, the two Vice Principals are new to the academy, as are about one quarter of the teaching staff. There have been some difficulties in recruiting fully qualified staff to teach information and communication technology and design and technology, but these are now fully staffed.

There are currently 673 students on roll of whom 43 are in the sixth form. The roll is increasing: for example there are about twice as many students in Year 7 than there are in Year 8. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups and of those

who speak English as an additional language is below the national average. The proportion who are eligible for a free school meal is much higher; this is also true of the proportion who have special educational needs including those with statements of special educational needs. The number of students joining the academy other than at the beginning of Year 7 or leaving at times, other than at the end of Years 11 or 12 and 13, is relatively low.

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

Attainment improved in 2010, building on the rising trend of the predecessor school. Standards remain low however, with students' GCSE results well below the national average. The academy's leaders have recognised that students enter in Year 7 with standards of literacy and writing that are low, and have adapted the curriculum to compensate for this. As a consequence, students are beginning to develop better literacy skills. There is an appropriate emphasis to the core subjects of English and mathematics. Early entry for GCSEs in both of these subjects is beginning to prove successful. In 2010, the proportion of students achieving GCSE grades A* to C in mathematics was the highest of all subjects at 45%. English approached 40%. The proportion of students attaining the highest grades A* to B is low but improving. It is relatively high in English Literature. In lessons, inspectors observed that the progress students make is now satisfactory. This is supported by the academy's own monitoring of progress. The academy's monitoring of student progress has developed well. Targets are highly challenging, and were met in 2010. Students receive half-termly progress reports that explain how well they are doing and what is necessary to improve.

Differences between the attainment of those students eligible for free school meals and their peers is less marked than seen nationally. Because of the collaborative arrangements that the academy now has with one of its sponsors, a nearby large further education college, students are able to succeed in a wide range of subjects and courses, especially those that develop vocational skills. For example students undertaking BTEC business and BTEC travel courses achieved well in 2010.

The academy's leaders recognise that the attainment of the significant number of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is very low, and have introduced many changes to tackle the issue. Focused intervention and significant changes to the curriculum in Years 7 and 8 are beginning to result in improvement. In general, the attainment of boys is below that of girls. This difference is most pronounced in English. In mathematics it is similar to that found nationally.

Sixth form students attain low standards in their GCE A levels, although a good proportion of the small Year 13 cohort progressed to their first choice university. The proportion gaining the highest grades was low in 2010, and the progress that they demonstrated was well below that expected.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The great majority of students are well behaved both in lessons and around the academy. Exclusion rates are in line with national averages and are showing improvement. In a small minority of lessons some students are too unsettled. This is predominantly in classes with a high proportion of low achieving students and in which teaching is not engaging. However, where teaching is strong, these same students take great pride in their work, make good progress and make a good contribution to learning, for example through accurate and helpful assessments of the work of their peers. Students told inspectors that behaviour is much improved since the academy opened and say that teachers' use of the disciplinary policy contributes well to this. They also say that there is less bullying and that when it does occur the response is more rapid. Attendance is also improving, and is currently in line with the national average. The number of students who are persistently absent is reducing, though it remains high. All groups of students show improved attendance this year compared to last. However, those students with special educational needs who receive additional support have the lowest attendance. Overall, students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are excluded to a greater extent than other students. The leader with responsibility for these students is aware of the issues and is bringing about improvements. The number of students who are late to school is low. However, too many are late for some of their lessons.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors agree with the academy's leaders' evaluation of teaching. There is still some inadequate teaching but leaders are aware of it and take successful steps to eliminate it. The best lessons are characterised by a high degree of challenge and students engrossed in their learning. The pace of lessons is at least satisfactory and teachers' subject knowledge is good. In a minority of lessons too much time is spent on relatively straightforward work. While students often work contentedly in such circumstances, they are not being sufficiently challenged. This is also at the expense of time being given to more complex work, such as that which develops analytical skills or which requires the application of knowledge. Teachers generally engage students well, through involving them in answering questions, for example. However, the use of questions to gauge understanding so that teaching can be adjusted if necessary is underdeveloped. Approaches often allow students of different abilities, including those who have special educational needs and those who are more able, some scope to demonstrate their abilities. However, the nature of the tasks set, and teachers' questions, are not sufficiently tailored to take account of their different abilities. In some cases plans for lessons contain such approaches, but they are not actually implemented. A range of teaching approaches were observed, including some collaborative work in Year 11 and individualised work in Year 7; both were successful in promoting students' learning and interest.

The curriculum has undergone many changes since the academy was formed. The extent to which it caters for the varied needs of students has improved. It enables many students who would not otherwise do so to achieve; for example students are able to participate in the wide range of vocational and work-related provision at the partner further education college. Students can access a full range of diplomas. Those students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are able to undertake a range of Entry and Foundation level provision both at the academy and its partner college. Those students who make faster progress are able to take GCSE examinations early in some subjects, including mathematics and science. Some students study Latin. The integrated curriculum for those who have just entered the school in Year 7 serves their needs well. The emphasis on literacy and numeracy recognises the low prior attainment of some students and is beginning to result in improved standards. However, while in many lessons literacy is developed through the focus on key words, there is insufficient development of other aspects of literacy including extended writing, as well as reading for meaning. In addition, the progress of some students, particularly boys, is hindered by their slow and poorly-formed handwriting. The school's specialist subjects are well chosen. English and digital media enrich other subject areas well. School targets in these areas were exceeded in 2010.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The academy's leaders accurately identify the improvements that have been made and where they are still required: their self evaluation is accurate. The improvement plan reflects this. There is a clarity of objectives and where appropriate there are measurable targets. However, there are not sufficient interim targets so that leaders, including governors, can judge if improvements are rapid enough or whether an increase in resources or a different approach is needed. Their judgements of the quality of teaching, while largely accurate, do not take sufficiently into account, the impact of teaching upon learning. The process for improving teaching is nevertheless thorough and leaders' own monitoring shows that it is effective: the proportion of lessons that are inadequate is diminishing, while that of good or better is increasing. As a result, students' learning in lessons is improving. This is further enhanced by the good use of partners to provide one to one tuition for some students. In addition, there are additional classes for students of average and above-average ability.

Subject leaders understand their roles. They undertake some lesson observations and as a result have a satisfactory understanding of the characteristics of teaching in their faculties. They are not always able to identify what aspects need to improve, however. They are now involved the evaluations of the work of their faculties. This is at an early stage of development. Though they monitor the work in students' books, inconsistencies, for example in the quality of marking, remain. Evaluations tend to be rather general; there is not enough detail about, for example, what areas of their

subjects students find difficult. As a result, their improvement plans are often not specific enough. For example, in one plan an action is to improve schemes of work for Years 7 to 9, but there is no reference to what aspects of the subject cause most difficulty, and which the least, so there is no sense of priority. There is, therefore, a strong risk that time will be spent improving aspects which need little change. Subject leaders are not yet held accountable for the quality of teaching in their subjects.

Good use is made of advanced skills teachers, or those who aspire to the role, to raise standards in the academy and also in the local primary schools. The academy also helps to raise standards locally by inviting primary school pupils in for lessons and through the work of its university partner. The capacity to improve is good.

The Governing Board provides strong support and challenge and is influential in providing a strategic direction. Governors' links are developing though closer working with faculties and other areas of the academy.

External support

The School Improvement Partner provides good advice and support. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has provided valued training, for example to develop leadership skills and also in providing support for literacy development.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve literacy by providing more opportunities across the curriculum for students to learn and apply the skills required for extended writing and reading for meaning.
- Ensure that leaders' classroom observations focus on the standards and the quality of learning of different groups in order to bring about improved approaches for all groups, including those students who find it difficult to settle to their work.

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

Yours sincerely

Alan Alder
Her Majesty's Inspector