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Mr Richard Smyth
Fulwood Academy
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Dear Mr Smyth

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Fulwood Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Shirley Gornall HMI to your academy on 2 and 3 December 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, scrutinized documents and met with the principal, other nominated staff, groups of students and the chair of the governing body.

Context

Fulwood Academy was opened in September 2009. The academy's main sponsor is Charles Dunstone, founder and Chief Executive of Carphone Warehouse. New buildings are currently planned for completion in September 2012 on the present site. A sixth form centre will open in September 2011. A new principal took up post on 1 January 2010. The academy's subject specialism is arts and digital media technologies. Currently 931 students are on roll. Whilst the academy is situated in Fulwood, north of Preston, the majority of students travel to school by bus from other areas of the city. The academy faces challenging circumstances as a result of

the demographic changes in the intake in recent years. About 34% of students come from homes where English is not their first language. Most students who are from minority ethnic backgrounds are Asian Muslim with significant numbers of Sikhs and Hindus. Other cultures represented include Afro-Caribbean, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Palestinian, Iranian, Polish and Thai. The proportion of students who are known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national average, at 28%. The ability profile of students on entry is similar to the national average although there are an increasing number of students with below average attainment when they join the academy. About 4.7% of students have statements of special educational needs and/or disabilities with a further 32% on the register of special needs.

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

The proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades rose to 64% in 2010, reflecting a broadening of the Key Stage 4 curriculum. The proportion of students attaining five or more A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics at 29% was significantly below the national rate and the academy's target. The academy acknowledges that this is a crucial area requiring further and rapid improvement. The standard of students' work examined by inspectors was at least satisfactory in most subjects observed and in some good. However, in many mathematics and English lessons visited, inspectors judged that students made at best satisfactory progress and too often inadequate. Too much inadequate teaching was observed in mathematics and English. In the majority of these lessons too many students were not engaged and were off task. Behaviour was poor and a barrier to the learning of others. Marking did not inform students of their progress. References to targets and examination criteria were limited and often non-existent. Consequently, many students made little or no progress. Early data and tracking of students' progress indicates a potentially stronger performance in 2011 but the progress made by students in some lessons, particularly in mathematics, is presently insufficient to secure rapid improvement.

Other relevant outcomes for students

Attendance was low in 2009/10 and the level of persistent absence was almost twice that found in similar schools. Attendance has improved in the current term due to rigorous monitoring and early intervention strategies; however, persistent absence remains high. The late arrival to lessons by some students has a detrimental effect on learning. Standards of student behaviour are improving, as evidenced by the recent reduction in exclusion levels and the positive comments from students who recognise that sanctions and rewards are beginning to have a positive impact. However, inadequate behaviour persists and leads to disruption in some lessons, particularly where students are not motivated by the teaching. Behaviour management has been strengthened but there are inconsistencies in the application of the academy's policies.

The effectiveness of provision

The majority of teaching observed during the monitoring visit was satisfactory and some was good. Much inadequate teaching was observed in mathematics and English. In many of these lessons planning was of variable quality; for example, students of all abilities were expected to complete the same work and as a result, the more able students were not always effectively challenged. In these lessons, there was too much teacher talk and opportunities missed to engage students more fully in their learning and to develop their speaking and thinking skills. Too much low-level disruptive behaviour was tolerated which slowed the pace of learning and which distracted others from their work. Poor behaviour in mathematics lessons presents a major barrier to learning in that subject. Marking does not yet offer students clear enough or sufficient guidance on the next steps they must take in order to improve their work. In some classes, expectations by teachers of how students' written work should be presented are not high enough. Useful opportunities to develop pupils' oral and literacy skills are missed.

Where teaching is stronger, it is marked by its brisk pace, high expectations of what students could achieve and by good behaviour and attentiveness to their tasks. New concepts are explained clearly and students' understanding of them regularly checked. Effective questioning revises learning points, maintains students' attention and encourages them to think deeply and reflectively about their answers. Time is well used. The use of assessment data to identify and rectify students' underachievement and to inform them of what they need to know, or be able to do, to achieve their targets has improved. However, there remains some variability in the effective use of assessment data to plan lessons.

The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been enhanced through the introduction in Year 7 of 'learning for life' programmes which focus on the development of personal and group skills. Vocational courses have been expanded to enrich the Key Stage 4 curriculum and to provide a curriculum that better meets the needs of all students. When entering the academy a large number of students have weaknesses in reading, writing, spelling and speaking which affect their performance across a range of subjects. Staff recognise this issue and steps are being taken to give support to the most vulnerable, for example through the well-judged use of a targeted programme to accelerate skills of the weakest readers. A recently established Literacy Steering Group has begun to influence and improve practice; however the development of students' literacy skills in lessons is very variable. There is no established system across school for improving spelling skills. There are limited opportunities for students to share their ideas with peers and present extended answers verbally. Many students have difficulty in writing at length and their range of expression is limited; too frequently they use worksheets which do not promote high standards of presentation. There is very little evidence of students' work celebrated through displays and used as a reference point for others' learning. A

reorganised Learning Resource Centre promotes a welcoming and positive environment for reading and study.

Care and support are strengths. Good pastoral systems are in place. These offer good support to pupils at risk of disaffection or exclusion. Effective steps are being taken to develop the academy's relationships with parents and the local community. Developing links with external agencies help to support vulnerable children and those at risk of underachieving. The 'academy plus' centre has been established to provide additional support for those at risk of underachieving and for the most vulnerable students. It is having a positive impact on promoting and developing their interpersonal skills and coping strategies.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The new principal has brought a strong sense of vision and purpose in planning the academy's provision and establishing an aspirational culture. He has quickly developed new quality assurance systems and a more robust approach to self-evaluation. His senior leaders are supporting him in developing systems and processes that will accelerate positive change. Priorities for improvement have been clearly identified and strategies developed to effect transformation in the culture and practices of the academy. There is recognition that self-evaluation was previously over-generous and a more accurate picture of strengths and weaknesses has now been established. The skills of leaders at all levels in monitoring and improving performance are being developed through training and coaching, supported by external partners. The tracking and monitoring of student progress is much improved. Data is generated and used effectively at a senior management level and by some middle managers to support improvement. Students and staff noted the 'significant' improvement since the appointment of the new principal.

The management of teaching and learning has improved. There is scope to ensure that teachers make greater use of assessment information when planning lessons. The principal and senior managers recognise the imperative of rapidly tackling inadequate provision and outcomes in mathematics and to a lesser extent English. There remains some variability at middle management level in the application of academy systems and procedures. Self-evaluation procedures are not yet fully embedded at senior and middle management level. While the development plan contains appropriate targets for improvement, there remains scope to add more detail to identify milestones so that progress towards targets can be more easily measured. Target setting, monitoring and tracking of student progress are improving but as yet are not having sufficient impact on outcomes. Procedures for the performance management systems are in place. There is scope for monitoring procedures to be much more robust so that inconsistencies in the application of the academy's rules and issues that impede the pace of learning, such as off-task behaviour, are swiftly identified and tackled. New leadership has strengthened the

capacity of the academy to improve provision; however, changes have not yet impacted sufficiently on outcomes.

External support

The academy's improvement partner is a regular visitor and provides thorough reports on its work. Links with the partner academy are continuing to grow and representatives from its sponsors visit regularly to assess and discuss its progress and to provide advice. Links with other academies are productive in seeking to embed the best practice. Governors offer significant expertise from the business and education sectors. The academy has also drawn on the support of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

Main Judgements

Given the continued low attainment in English and mathematics at Key Stage 4, inspectors concluded that the academy has made inadequate progress towards raising standards. This monitoring inspection has raised serious concerns about the standard of education provided by the academy and I am recommending a further monitoring inspection.

Priorities for further improvement

- Rapidly raise attainment for five GCSEs at A* to C, including English and mathematics.
- Embed an effective literacy strategy across the curriculum by:
 - providing clear models to support student acquisition of skills in writing and speaking
 - creating opportunities across the curriculum for students to give more extended spoken and written responses
 - developing a consistent approach to improving students' skills in spelling
 - improving the quality of displays in classrooms and on corridors to celebrate students' achievement and exemplify their skills development.
- Accelerate the rate of progress by ensuring that more teaching is good or better, particularly in English and mathematics by:
 - tackling, as a matter of urgency, inadequate teaching in mathematics and English
 - ensuring that poor behaviour does not continue to present a barrier to learning in any subject and particularly in mathematics

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- sharing best practice, both within the school and through work with partners, so that inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning are tackled and all students have the opportunity to engage in consistently challenging learning
 - ensuring questioning is used effectively to challenge individual students according to their needs
 - promoting a greater focus on independent and group learning skills
 - ensuring that marking in all subjects gives a clear indication to students of what they need to do to improve
 - ensuring the effective use of data for lesson planning.
- Sharpen monitoring and support procedures so that inconsistencies in the application of the academy's rules and systems are swiftly identified and tackled.

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

Patrick Geraghty
Her Majesty's Inspector