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Mr Rahman and Mr Klee
Executive Headteachers
The Isle of Sheppey Academy
Head Office East Site, Minster Road
Minster-on-Sea
Kent
ME12 3JQ

Dear Mr Rahman and Mr Klee

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Isle of Sheppey Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Ian Hodgkinson HMI to your academy on 15–16 February 2011, 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 staff, groups of students, a representative of the sponsors and member of the governing body and the school improvement partner.

Context

The academy is arranged around five smaller schools with three schools based on the east site and two on the west. Each of these small schools has a head of school. After the first year of operation the principal and the head of one school left the academy. A new head of school has been appointed for June 2011 and the academy is in the process of recruiting a new principal for September 2011. Three assistant headteachers have been appointed to build leadership capacity and the academy has also appointed a director of specialism for business and enterprise.

There are currently 2136 students on roll at the academy. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is below average, with the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language being low. There are above average numbers of students entitled to free school meals. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is double the national average although the number with statements is just below that found nationally. There have been significant changes of staffing since the academy opened but these changes have reduced recently. The academy still faces difficulties in recruiting staff in some curriculum areas.

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

The academy has responded well to the National Challenge initiative, designed to raise attainment, by applying a sharp focus to provision in English and mathematics. Improvements have been made to the quality of teaching. This, coupled to more accurate tracking and intervention with students, is leading to improvements in progress in these core subjects. Consequently the proportion of students gaining 5 A*-C including English and mathematics rose by 8% when compared with the predecessor school to meet the National Challenge benchmark of 30% in 2010. Current data shows that attainment is set to rise again for the current Year 11. However, last year's positive GCSE results at the threshold of 5 A*-C including English and mathematics masked significant underachievement by lower ability students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities across the attainment range. This pattern of underachievement, although improving slightly, is set to be replicated for the current cohort and exists to a lesser extent in other year groups.

Students report a general improvement in attitudes and behaviour in lessons, particularly in the last six months. This, they say, allows them to enjoy their learning more. In the best lessons where students are actively involved there is palpable enjoyment of and engagement in learning. However, there are still too many lessons that are over directed by teachers resulting in passivity amongst learners.

There has been a significant improvement so far this year in the attainment of the specialist business and enterprise subjects under dynamic new leadership. However, there remain variable rates of learning and progress across the curriculum, although gaps are closing slowly. Results in the sixth form show a significant increase in attainment for those students completing Year 13 study. This was due to the strong performance of some A level subjects, for example law, and the success of BTEC courses generally. However, attainment in the sixth form is variable across subject areas and courses. Attainment in AS examinations at the end of Year 12 was particularly low in some subject areas, most notably science, and the academy discontinued some courses as a result.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Overall, the academy has a calm and ordered atmosphere. Students say that behaviour is much improved around the two sites compared to the predecessor upper school. Students generally feel safe although a small minority have concerns about bullying and the variability of subsequent pastoral support between the small schools to prevent it. The punctuality of a significant minority of students is poor and inconsistency in approach to lateness between the two sites means that it is not always addressed actively. Attendance remains low with too many students persistently absent. This is particularly the case for the current Year 11. Recent initiatives, including provision at the Nova Centre, the Vivo rewards system for high attendance and the proactive work of family liaison officers have led to a small improvement. However, raising attendance remains a significant challenge and urgent priority for the academy, especially to help in overcoming the widespread underachievement of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The effectiveness of provision

The academy has developed an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning and can demonstrate recent improvement. New data systems are providing more accurate information to teachers on the progress of their classes and are helping middle and senior leaders support teaching. The quality of teaching remains inconsistent. The best teachers use assessment information well to plan and deliver engaging tasks to the full range of learners in their classes. However, this remains a weakness in many lessons. The academy has worked hard on assessment practice and most teachers are now marking work regularly and giving students clear feedback on how to improve.

Provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities has suffered from a lack of careful evaluation, despite a series of interventions. This is now starting to be improved through evaluating their impact and starting to design more coherent ways of supporting students. However, these relatively recent changes have not had time to secure a significant impact on outcomes for this group of students.

The academy recognises that curriculum provision in its first year of operation was inappropriate for its learners, particularly on the west site. Changes for the current academic year have improved the position for learners and resulted in better engagement in learning. However, the academy has found the delivery of the curriculum in a small school is too restrictive for Key Stage 4 learners. This is because it does not allow fine setting by ability and therefore is not best suited to the full range of learners. Steps have been taken to refine the curriculum, with the potential to bring a range of benefits, but the new model does not start until June 2011.

The impact of the enterprise specialism has been very positive across the academy and in the wider community. Enterprise based objectives are a feature of most lessons and students respond well to developing work-related skills, such as team-working in lessons.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Leadership and management of the academy have been subject to significant change since the academy opened. The current lack of a principal has limited the strategic leadership of the academy as leaders await a new appointment. Current leadership has recognised the significant challenges facing the academy and produced focused short-term action plans to address them. The development and positive implementation of these plans has only been effective since September. However, this has resulted in a number of significant improvements in provision. One example is in the availability and use of data across the academy. Due to the relatively recent introduction of various actions progress is uneven. This is due to the differing scale of the various challenges facing the academy. However, accountability has been strengthened and leaders are beginning to improve aspects of provision that have been inadequate in the past.

Self-evaluation systems have recently been introduced across the curriculum and are starting to positively benefit students' learning. Middle leadership programmes are strengthening curriculum leadership but inconsistencies remain. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the academy.

Governors have been short of accurate monitoring information until recently. This has limited their ability to hold the academy to account for some key aspects of its performance. It has also limited progress in key areas requiring improvement such as attendance. This inspection raised serious concerns about the rigour of procedures to check the suitability of staff to work with children. The academy has recognised this and is taking the urgent steps required to rectify the situation.

External support

The academy has valued the external support it has received from the School Improvement Partner. Additional help has also been provided by the main sponsor in supporting various areas of the curriculum and working with senior leaders, although the impact of this support has been variable. It has, for example, been more effective in physics than modern foreign languages. Work with the Creative Partnerships organisation has helped the academy to develop more engaging styles of teaching. This work is improving the quality of students' learning and preparing staff to work in the teaching environment that will be available when the academy occupies its new buildings in 2013.

Main Judgements

While the academy has demonstrated capacity to improve recently it has made inadequate progress since opening.

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

- Ensure that all staff have the necessary checks required to work with children.
- Embed and improve systems that reduce persistent absence in order to raise attendance levels.
- Improve attainment and progress, particularly for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Refine and consolidate the actions taken recently to improve the quality of teaching and learning across the academy.
- Ensure leaders and managers at all levels systematically eliminate remaining weaknesses in provision and outcomes

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

Peter Gale
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Dame Floella Benjamin, Chair of the Governing Body
The Academies Group, DfE [Paul.hann@education.gsi.gov.uk]