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Dr C Taylor
Principal
Sirius Academy
Pickering Road
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Dear Dr Taylor

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Sirius Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Jan Bennett HMI, to your academy on 23 and 24 November 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, members of the senior leadership team, curriculum leaders, groups of students, the Chair of the Board of Directors and the School Improvement Partner.

Context

Since opening in September 2009, the academy has experienced significant changes in staffing, roles and responsibilities. A further 22 new appointments for September 2010 saw the academy fully staffed. The academy is sponsored by Hull College. The local authority is an associate sponsor. A Board of Directors, including representatives from both sponsors, carries out the duties of governance. The academy has joint specialisms in sport and environmental science. Sixth form provision, offered in partnership with Hull College, opened in September 2010. The Principal joined the academy in September 2009.

The academy has 948 students on roll, including 31 in the sixth form. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is more than twice the national average. A small, but increasing proportion of students, speak English as an additional language and/or come from minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportions of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and with a statement of special educational needs are above average. The building of new academy premises is well underway on land adjacent to the current site. The academy community is scheduled to transfer from the predecessor school buildings to this state-of-the-art accommodation in September 2011.

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

The academy's first published performance data show a marked increase in the proportion of students gaining five A* to C grades, including English and mathematics at GCSE. While below average, the attainment of 16-year-olds rose comfortably above the government's floor target for secondary schools and surpassed challenging targets. This represents a significant improvement compared to the predecessor school. Around half the students gained a pass grade in English and the same proportion did so in mathematics. Only a fifth of students gained a two or more A* to C grades in science. Improvements in performance were greater for girls than boys. The small number of students speaking English as an additional language performed significantly better than similar students nationally. Students' overall performance was stronger in vocational courses than in GCSE equivalents.

In the majority of lessons inspectors observed students making satisfactory progress. Where teachers made regular and thorough checks on learning, offered brisk pace and challenge, and students displayed positive attitudes, progress in learning was good. The academy is working to improve attitudes to learning and raise expectations and aspirations further. Older students spoke positively about their experiences. They told inspectors that the quality of lessons has improved and that they value their teachers' support and guidance. Younger students spoke with enthusiasm about the range of options available from Year 9 onwards.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Teachers apply the academy's agreed behaviour management strategies consistently. Their actions are effective in containing any low level disruption, but the time taken to get students back on track has the overall impact of slowing the progress of learning. A high staff presence on corridors and around the school site ensures that mass movement is orderly. Some students have yet to take responsibility for their own behaviour so that it is appropriate in the absence of adult supervision. Nevertheless, staff, students and representatives of the Board of Directors and sponsors were united in their view that behaviour has improved significantly as a direct consequence of the higher expectations and behaviour management strategies implemented by the academy's leaders and staff. Fixed-term

exclusions for the first 11 weeks of the autumn term have more than halved compared to the same point in 2009.

Attendance showed an improving trend throughout the 2009/10 year. A coordinated approach combining rigorous monitoring, prompt follow-up of absence and a system of rewards, promotes attendance. Overall attendance since September shows further improvement to comfortably average when compared with other secondary schools. However, attendance on the first day of this monitoring inspection was slightly below this at 91.7%. The academy recognises the need to maintain an unrelenting focus on attendance in order to sustain improvement and make further gains. A staff presence at the gates and along the walkways into the academy encourages those students who dawdle. The academy's figures show an improving trend in punctuality. Inspectors observed a prompt start to lessons after break and lunchtime. They also observed 51 students arriving late for the morning tutor period.

Students' personal development and enjoyment of school is supported well through good levels of participation in enrichment activities, clubs and teams. Higher expectations of behaviour, punctuality and standards of dress are promoting a greater sense of personal responsibility.

The effectiveness of provision

The overall quality of teaching is allowing students to make satisfactory progress. Strengths of teaching include teachers' subject knowledge, classroom relationships and the consistent approach to behaviour management. Inspectors observed some imaginative learning activities and materials, but also much that was pedestrian rather than captivating. Less frequently, inspectors observed very effective practice in the use of strategies to check for learning throughout the lesson. In these lessons the pace was brisk and the teachers' focus was constantly on what the students were learning, identifying gaps and skilfully re-emphasising the main learning points.

The use of assessment data at a strategic level provides senior leaders with a secure view of the progress of different groups of students. This information is used to shape future provision. Assessment at classroom level to check that learning is secure and moves forward quickly is less well developed.

The quality of teaching is stronger than the quality of learning. This lag in learning results from two weaknesses. First, despite the good improvements, off-task behaviour is too frequent and attitudes to learning are often characterised by compliance rather than enthusiasm and diligent application to work. This slows the pace of learning, even where teachers demonstrate good skills and subject knowledge. Second, in some lessons the emphasis is more on following the lesson plan and less on regularly checking: what students are writing or recording in their books; whether they all understand the work and can apply it correctly; and that a good work rate is maintained.

The curriculum has been strengthened considerably and better matches the needs and interests of students. Bespoke provision is developing to support the learning of students who are potentially vulnerable in mainstream classes. Partnership arrangements with Hull College and the sport specialism have been influential in developing provision and forging community links. The rapidly developing enrichment curriculum is well received by students. The contribution it makes to improving students' participation and enjoyment is considerable. On the first day of the monitoring inspection, the academy hosted a first round Yorkshire Schools Cup rugby match and fifty Year 6 pupils attended a basketball festival hosted by the academy. A lunchtime *Club Sirius* talent show was very well attended and greatly enjoyed.

The small sixth form receives considerable support and direction from Hull College. Retention of the small cohort of students has been excellent, with five of the initial 36 students enrolled choosing to move to an entirely college based programme of study. Students say that they like the joint arrangements and benefit from the familiarity and small group size at the academy combined with the advantages afforded by the resources of the much larger college. Sixth form attendance at both school and college is holding up well. Expansion of this joint provision is planned for September 2011.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The principal has established clear and shared priorities. She has delegated appropriately so not to be side-tracked by the building work. Roles are becoming established as new post-holders get to grips with their responsibilities. The expectations of curriculum leaders have been raised and they are supported by more senior staff. An appropriate framework of monitoring and review informs the academy's broadly accurate self-evaluation. Inspectors endorse the academy's view that good progress has been made towards raising attainment. However, in a few judgements of the quality of provision and outcomes they found the academy to be over-generous. The emphasis of lesson observations undertaken by senior staff has been on the teaching and less so on the progress made by all students in the class or the part attitudes play in promoting consistently good learning.

Senior leaders, the Board of Directors and sponsors have together achieved much in the first year. The academy is well-placed to drive further improvement towards ambitious targets.

External support

The Board of Directors has high expectations of senior leaders. Both Hull College and the local authority are represented at regular Board meetings. The Board has initiated a range of actions which have raised the profile of the academy in the local

community and seen as associated increase in applications from prospective students. Links established with Hull FC Rugby Club and The Deep support the work of both specialisms and extend opportunities for participation and learning in both sport and environmental science. Hull College in its role as sponsor has proved to be a significant partner in supporting sixth form development, providing alternative pathways for a small number of potentially vulnerable students in Key Stage 4 and providing additional capacity to develop teaching. External reports vary in their usefulness in terms of their contribution to raising attainment.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising attainment.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue to develop students' attitudes to learning by engaging them in interesting and challenging activities so that they consistently make good gains in their knowledge and understanding.
- Ensure that teachers develop their skills of assessment and use these throughout the lesson to check that all students have a secure understanding the work.
- Increase the focus of lesson observation to place greater emphasis on judging the rate of progress in learning and the impact of students' attitudes on learning outcomes.

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

Yours sincerely

Cathryn Kirby

Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Neil Porteus, Chair of the Board of Directors
The Academies Group, DfE [Paul.hann@education.gsi.gov.uk]