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11 February 2011

Mrs G Jones
Principal
Heartlands Academy
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Dear Mrs Jones

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Heartlands Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy with Lindsay Hebditch HMI on 9 and 10 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, including 17 lesson observations. They scrutinised documents, including safeguarding documentation and the academy's raising attainment plan, and met with the Principal, nominated staff, a group of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the sponsor.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009 in the accommodation of its predecessor, The Heartlands High School, whose overall effectiveness was judged outstanding in its final inspection prior to closure. Most staff, including the school's senior leaders, transferred to the academy. Work on the new building, adjacent to the existing school, will start shortly and is due for completion in September 2012. The academy is one of 11 currently sponsored by E-ACT. Its specialist subjects are mathematics and sport.

The academy is smaller than average, with 681 students on roll, including 17 in the first sixth form cohort that started in September 2010. Most students come from the immediate locality, an area that experiences high levels of social and economic disadvantage. There is a high level of student mobility each year. Most students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, with the largest proportions from Pakistani or Black African heritage. A large majority of students speak English as an additional language. Two thirds of students are known to be eligible for free school meals, a proportion that is far higher than the national figure. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average, although the number with a statement to meet their special educational need is comparatively low.

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

On entry to the academy, student attainment is low. In particular, few students achieve the higher levels of attainment in English or mathematics at Key Stage 2. Standards at Key Stage 4 in the predecessor school had also been well below average, but the school was on a clear trajectory of improvement and had taken significant steps in narrowing the national attainment gap. In its first year, the academy accelerated this improvement and exceeded all its Key Stage 4 targets in 2010: 47% of students achieved at least five A*-C grade GCSEs (including English and mathematics), a 6% increase on the previous year. Although this headline figure is below average, and below the sponsor's blanket 10% target increase, the academy exceeded the national figures in certain key indicators: the proportion gaining at least five A*-C and at least five A*-G grades and the capped average points score. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 was broadly average, but only 10% of GCSE grades were the highest A*/A, just half the national figure. Moreover, standards in English were significantly low.

Given their starting points, students made exceptional progress in 2010. Boys did particularly well, as did students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The academy's specialist subjects made a strong contribution, with exceptional results in mathematics and an impressive number of students gaining a qualification in physical education. Although some groups performed better than others, there was no significant underachievement. These impressive results were achieved by high quality teaching, systematic target setting and tracking, and robust intervention and support, including after-school revision classes across all subjects. English had particular staffing difficulties, and the rigour of the additional targeted support for students, including a residential to complete coursework, was instrumental in raising standards in the last few months of Year 11.

The academy sets ambitious targets and makes excellent use of rigorous assessment data to track the progress of individual students and to implement suitable interventions. Students know their individual targets for each subject and are kept well informed about their level of performance. Evidence from lesson observations shows that standards are continuing to rise, particularly in English. Assessment

information indicates that the academy will significantly surpass its 2010 results this year, even with an academically weaker Year 11 cohort.

The quality of learning was at least good in most lessons observed during the visit, including two sessions of sixth-form teaching. Outstanding progress was seen in three English lessons where the level of challenge and pace of learning were exceptional and learning activities were cleverly planned to ensure the full involvement of every individual. Students make most rapid progress when planned outcomes are ambitious, when learning is skilfully managed, understanding and progress are constantly checked and when learning activities fully engage all students in the process of learning and assessment. Peer and self-assessment are integral to learning in lessons. When implemented judiciously, this has a significant impact on the students' progress because they better understand in detail how to improve their level of performance. For example, Year 10 students evaluated what went well in their Romeo and Juliet work by analysing exemplars as a whole class, before reviewing and revising weak answers and then using their understanding to edit key aspects of their own work to produce A/A* grade answers.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students behave well in lessons, in assembly and during break and lunch times. They are orderly and considerate as they move around the academy and are welcoming and polite towards visitors. Incidents of unacceptable behaviour are rare. Although there were five permanent exclusions in its first year, four in connection to one very serious incident, levels of fixed term exclusion are reducing steadily. The students' positive attitudes make a good contribution to their learning and progress. They are motivated to succeed and take a pride in their work. Students work collaboratively and are mature and reflective, for example when listening to the opinions of others or when evaluating one another's performance. However, many students are quite passive in lessons and often lack confidence, for example when asked to volunteer answers or express their own views. Teachers are careful to address this reticence by planning activities that build self esteem and challenge passivity or any recalcitrance. Relationships between adults and students, built on trust, are a significant strength of the academy.

Improving attendance has been a significant challenge, but the academy has achieved considerable success in reducing absence and also levels of persistent absence. Overall attendance is around 94% for the current academic year. Although below the academy's ambitious 95% target, this figure is a significant improvement on the previous year and now exceeds the national average. Attendance in Year 11 is particularly good. Levels of persistent absence are below average.

The effectiveness of provision

The academy has strengthened the overall quality of teaching and particularly its use of assessment by implementing common routines for planning lessons and

developing excellent strategies for assessing students' progress, including marking. Lessons are well planned with clear objectives and a further 'challenge objective' which routinely raises students' expectations and aspirations. Work is well managed and directed, using the interactive whiteboards to effectively structure learning. Relationships between adults and students are very good and there is a positive climate for learning across the academy. However, the best lessons are when teachers set an ambitious pace and secure substantive gains by modelling work and preparing activities to sustain the engagement of the whole group. In English, for example, the carousel activities necessitated students moving around the classroom to gather and analyse information from different sources before synthesising their findings in pairs and groups. High quality outcomes were more evident when students were given opportunity to rehearse and refine their ideas through talk, before articulating their answers or constructing their written response. The best teaching strikes the right balance between drafting, editing and crafting high quality outcomes and allocates suitable time and emphasis to peer and self-assessment. Assessment and marking are notable strengths of teaching. Teachers use an impressive range of strategies to check that students understand work so that lessons can proceed at a good pace and additional support can be properly targeted. Marking is completed conscientiously and contributes strongly to accelerating progress because students are encouraged to work hard and are clear about precisely what they need to do to improve their work.

The curriculum is continuously reviewed and revised to ensure that it meets the needs and aspirations of the students, with suitable pathways for different groups and clear guidance for individual students. More able students, for example, can opt for single sciences and take early entry in history and/or religious education. Cross-curricular support for literacy is promoted through the weekly 'literacy for learning' focus in all lessons, but common strategies are not evident for improving key aspects of literacy, notably writing. The new sixth-form curriculum offers courses mainly at level 3. The range of options, including wider enrichment opportunities, is narrow because post-16 student numbers are so small.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The Principal's appointment from the predecessor school has ensured a seamless transition to academy status. The Principal provides strong strategic leadership with a relentless focus on raising standards and assuring the well-being of each individual student. Senior leaders have successfully embedded the strategies for driving improvement that were implemented in the predecessor school. Procedures for monitoring the academy's work and the progress of students are systematic and impressively rigorous, and are soundly based on comprehensive analysis of data. The robust monitoring programme ensures that high expectations are understood and shared by all staff, so that ambition is embedded at all levels. Rigorous evaluations of teaching and marking strengthen teaching and assessment: weaker provision is supported, best practice is shared, and stronger staff are encouraged to

improve their effectiveness through the academy's own outstanding teacher programme. The academy's development plan focuses sharply on its key priorities. It sets extremely challenging targets, with clear success criteria against which progress is evaluated.

The academy has set itself an ambitious target to rapidly expand and develop the sixth form over the next few years. At present the sixth form is too small to be able to give students wide choice of options or broad enrichment opportunities, but leaders and managers understand the challenges in establishing a successful post-16 provision.

The academy has demonstrated a very strong capacity to sustain and extend the improvements made in the first 18 months and to further strengthen the outcomes for students. The governing body is knowledgeable about the academy and is consequently in a position to provide suitable challenge, should it be needed.

External support

The academy has not needed significant external support since it opened because its leadership and management are largely self-sufficient. However, it is able to turn to the sponsors for support whenever necessary. The support and challenge provided by the School Improvement Partner is particularly valued.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Maximise the impact of the academy's strategies to accelerate progress and further raise standards, particularly for the more able students and in English.
- Ensure that the developing sixth-form provision is of the same high quality as the main school and that it meets fully the needs and aspirations of those students who opt to stay on.

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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Peter Fair, Chair of the Governing Body
The Academies Group, DfE Colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk