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Mr Barry Fishwick
Executive Principal
Manchester Creative and Media Academy for Girls
Brookside Road
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Dear Mr Fishwick

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Manchester Creative and Media Academy for Girls

Introduction

Following my visit with Mark Williams HMI to your academy on 1 and 2 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, scrutinised documents and met with the Executive Principal, the Acting Principal, senior staff, the directors of learning for English and mathematics, two groups of students, four governors including a representative of the sponsors, and the School Improvement Partner. A letter was received from a parent. Of the 20 lesson observations, five were conducted jointly with senior or middle managers.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009, a year earlier than initially planned, at the same time as the Manchester Creative and Media Academy for Boys with which it is federated. Almost all of the students and staff, including the Principal and large senior leadership team, transferred to the academy from the predecessor school. The academy is fully staffed. The two academies will eventually be housed together

in new buildings on the site of the boys' academy. They opened a new shared sixth form in September 2010 and currently only seven students are on roll. The academies collaborate in various ways; for instance, one senior staff member has leadership responsibilities across both academies for attendance. The model of governance is through a single trust and two governing bodies which have considerable overlap in membership. The academies are sponsored by The Manchester College, Manchester City Council and Microsoft. In addition to creative and media, the girls' academy specialises in science.

There are 1088 girls aged 11 to 16 years on roll and one girl in the sixth form. Numbers joining in Year 7 each year are much lower than those leaving Year 11. The current Year 7 cohort, at 148, is close to the admission figure proposed for the future. Approximately 40% of students are of minority ethnic heritage. Nearly 10% speak English as an additional language and a few are at the early stages of learning to speak English. Around 30% of students have special educational needs and/or disabilities, which is higher than average. Of these, 17 have a statement of special educational needs. The academy serves a community that experiences some disadvantage; 43% of the students are known to be eligible for free school meals, which is nearly three times the national average.

The academy is experiencing a period of change in senior leadership: the substantive Principal left mid September 2010. The finance director left at the same time. A Vice Principal has been appointed as Acting Principal. The academy had planned to review leadership roles and staffing structures in readiness for the move in 2012 to the new buildings, and also to take account of the falling roll, but now intends to start this process straight away.

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

The academy admits students of all abilities but overall, their results in national tests at the end of primary school were well below average though with a slight upward trend. Many students have weak basic skills in literacy, oracy and numeracy. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is well below average. Teachers' assessments in 2010 indicated that only 27% of students reached the higher Levels 6 or 7 in English and science and 40% in mathematics while around 70% reached the standard expected of 14-year-olds, Level 5, in each subject. Improvements to assessment procedures give the academy greater confidence in the accuracy of the 2010 results. However, the academy does not have a secure picture of students' progress in subjects, functional skills and competencies in Years 7 and 8.

The academy's range of Key Stage 4 courses, particularly the vocational ones, has led to a significant rise to 79% of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE and in equivalent qualifications. However, fewer than half of them, 37% included GCSE English and mathematics. This below-average proportion is similar to the predecessor school's results in 2007 to 2009, and fell short of the academy's target of 40%. Not enough middle and high attaining students reached the standards of which they were capable. Attainment in English and mathematics also

remains significantly below average with just under half of students gaining grade C or better. These results represented inadequate progress for too many students. Students' limited success at the higher A* to C grades in several GCSE subjects has led the academy to realise that there is much to do to ensure the most able students reach their potential. It has refined strategies to raise attainment this year: 'assertive mentoring' now has a stronger focus on students' progress rather than on just the grade C/D boundary. This emphasis is informing advice following early entry in GCSE English and mathematics: last year, some students were too easily satisfied with grade C rather than striving for higher grades.

While 91% of students achieved five A* to G passes and 98% at least one pass, these improved figures remain below national averages. There is some unevenness in the achievement of different groups: students who speak English as an additional language perform significantly better than their peers while the gap in performance narrowed between students who receive free school meals and those who do not.

The quality of learning was satisfactory in most lessons. Impediments to better progress included students' unsatisfactory attitudes to learning in a few classes and their weak basic skills. Crucially, students were unable to make strong gains in knowledge, skills and understanding because activities were wrongly pitched, often too low, and took too little account of their needs and starting points. Some students are passive learners who lack self-confidence, despite the small size of many classes.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' behaviour, attitudes to learning and other attributes vary. Behaviour was good and occasionally outstanding in around half of the lessons, particularly when students were interested and challenged in their learning. It was unsatisfactory in three lessons and disrupted learning. Students confirmed that, while this sometimes happens, behaviour overall is improving. Students are generally polite and most move sensibly around the academy, although not always with a sense of purpose; not all are punctual to lessons. Some eat snacks and drink fizzy or hot drinks on the move, showing some disregard for healthy lifestyles, and sometimes dropping litter.

Attendance remains low but is steadily improving. Fewer students are persistently absent, but the proportion remains too high. Students enjoy enrichment and media activities such as film making. They display increasingly high aspirations, for example in wanting to go to university and aiming for careers in medicine or teaching. Students' cultural understanding is under developed; the creative and media specialisms have the potential to make a positive contribution to this.

The effectiveness of provision

Senior leaders' view that two thirds of the teaching is good or outstanding is too generous. There are examples of strong practice within the academy, characterised by a very clear focus on students' learning. These teachers cater effectively for students' different needs to optimise learning for all and provide good opportunities

for students to work and learn together and from each other. However, most of the teaching is satisfactory and not enough is good. Consequently, students are too often not making the progress they need if they are to have the opportunities in the future that the academy desires for them.

Characteristics of the satisfactory teaching that hamper better progress include lack of challenge for the most able and insufficient attention to modifying activities for the less able or those who have special educational needs. Too often, all the students in a class tackle the same work, with extension work provided for those who finish first rather than targeting the most able. Sometimes teachers dominate the talking or take answers from a minority without drawing others into discussion. This impedes the development of students' reasoning skills and articulation of their ideas. Teachers do not have consistently high expectations of students' work rate, contributions or potential.

The use of assessment to support learning is also inconsistent. Questioning does not always check students' learning. The best probes understanding and pursues greater depth or extended answers through follow-up questions. The quality of marking is inconsistent: some is helpful in moving learning forward, some is regular with encouraging comments but not useful in furthering thinking, and some is cursory.

There are some strengths to the curriculum but also important weaknesses. The specialist subjects are helping to raise aspirations and, along with several vocational courses, are having a positive impact on attainment and enjoyment. The thematic project work in Years 7 and 8 is, as leaders recognise, not well embedded or fully understood by staff. A lack of detailed guidance on how to plan lessons that develop competencies and functional skills means that teachers are primarily focusing on subject-based objectives. Even where competencies are included in plans, it is unclear how progression in these skills is to be developed or assessed.

Weaknesses in the way some of the academy's safeguarding arrangements are put into practice include inconsistency in the way students are registered when they enter lessons, with a few examples of no registration at all. Senior leaders recognise this presents a safeguarding issue. A few students were observed wandering around the academy during lesson times, unchallenged by staff. The site has some 'nooks and crannies' where students can be out-of-sight from staff at break times. Risk assessments are too generic and are not routinely reviewed to evaluate their effectiveness. Not all staff are fully aware of the academy's e-safety policy or of a current issue relating to students' access to social networking websites.

Leaders' determined approach to improving behaviour and attendance across both academies has included some good work with families and students but much is in the early stages and not fully embedded.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The academy did not make the progress it should have in the first year. During that time, leadership and management structures and processes were not properly established. This is one reason for the degree of inconsistency currently evident in provision and practice. For instance, no performance management was conducted during 2009-10, including of the former Principal. It has been introduced this term but, to date, only 26 of the 88 teachers have completed the autumn term element. There has been no suitable system of line management or regular meetings between middle and senior leaders. This means those who have leadership and management responsibilities cannot be held properly to account. A Vice Principal has worked with some subject departments, sensibly focusing on English and mathematics or where performance was particularly weak, but such an informal approach is unsatisfactory in the longer term. Senior leaders intend to reintroduce line management: clarity about roles, responsibilities and accountability is urgently required.

In recent months, senior staff have taken a number of actions to challenge performance and secure improvements. There have been some useful starting points such as the process of subject 'triangle review'. Overall, however, approaches are not systematic enough to ensure coherence and consistency, to drive improvement and hold staff to account. At present, too much depends on the skills of individuals, some of whom show promise. The quality of senior leadership is variable. Some senior leaders show greater awareness of how much needs to be done and better understanding of how to drive improvement. There is similar variability in the skills and practices of middle level leaders. The directors of learning for English and mathematics monitor aspects of work in their departments and identify and share strengths and weaknesses but each uses her own systems. Rigorous monitoring and self-evaluation is not an established part of every leader's work.

The academy has a number of action plans, for example for teaching and learning and for the whole academy. These do not share a common format and most have weaknesses: objectives are sometimes confused with actions, intended outcomes are not sharply defined, and systems for checking quality and impact are not well understood or sometimes even omitted.

The quality of teaching is monitored and practice that is weak is now being challenged appropriately both through informal support and coaching and, where appropriate, formal procedures. Recent moves to focus on what students are learning rather than the mechanics of teaching are leading to more accurate assessment of where strengths and weaknesses lie. Leaders acknowledged that previous observations had been too positive. Encouragement is an important part of improving practice, but it is critical that staff know precisely what development is needed. There was close alignment with inspectors on the evaluation of the jointly observed lessons. Teachers engaged positively with inspectors during feedback sessions, showing a readiness to reflect on how they might improve their practice.

The governing body is committed to improving outcomes and quality of provision. Governors are experienced and knowledgeable and have overcome significant inherited difficulties relating to finance and lack of information about the predecessor school's staff. The governing body provides challenge for senior leaders, but this is not always captured sufficiently in minutes or action points with details of who should do what and by when to help secure more rapid improvement and hold the leaders to account. Governors should seek ways of checking that the information they receive from the academy is of good quality, thus equipping them to fulfil their roles of challenge and support.

The academy has faced a number of challenges in its first four terms and has seen some improvement in outcomes for students. However, weaknesses in leadership and management have meant that systems and structures are not well established and inconsistencies are rife. The academy's self-evaluation of the quality of provision is too favourable. Action planning lacks rigour and priorities for improvement are not underpinned by robust analysis of data and the outcomes of monitoring. All of this has impeded the academy's progress and, consequently, capacity for improvement is inadequate, despite some recent useful developments.

External support

The academy has received good support from The Manchester College, including financial management, human resources and extra-curricular provision. The contribution of the other sponsors has been more limited though nevertheless valued by the academy. The academy improvement partner's reports were overly positive last year, although they rightly recognised the beneficial impact of collaboration between the academies. The academy has made satisfactory use of a range of activities organised by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and has drawn on external consultants to support work in mathematics and science.

Main Judgements

The academy has made **inadequate progress**. 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 consistent application of safeguarding arrangements.
- Build on recent work to increase the proportion of teaching that is good or better, ensuring:
 - lesson planning takes account of students' needs and potential to provide activities that challenge all students appropriately, especially the more able
 - teachers use assessment effectively in lessons to check all students' progress and further their learning through good quality feedback on their work.

- Develop further the schemes of work for Years 7 and 8 and provide guidance for teachers on:
 - the specific competencies and functional skills to be taught
 - securing progression in these skills as well as in subject content
 - the assessment of students' progress in the skills and subjectsand ensure effective liaison between leaders who oversee this curriculum and the directors of learning for subjects.
- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels in driving more rapid improvement and eradicating inconsistencies by:
 - defining clear lines of accountability, ensuring roles and responsibilities are well understood by all staff
 - establishing systems for rigorous monitoring and evaluation of all aspects of the academy's work
 - sharpening the quality of action planning, setting clear priorities and success criteria, and paying attention to the related development needs of staff.

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

Jane Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector