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4 March 2011

Mr D Blackledge
Principal
Furness Academy
Thornccliffe Road
Barrow-in-Furness
Cumbria
LA14 5QP

Dear Mr Blackledge

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Furness Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 2 and 3 March 2011 with Patrick Geraghty HMI, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit 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, nominated staff, two groups of students and a group of parents. Inspectors also met with the former Chair of the Governing Body and the Acting Chair of the Governing Body, both of whom are also representatives of the sponsors. Inspectors observed 20 lessons, four of which were carried out jointly with senior leaders. They also made brief visits to an assembly and nine learning group sessions. A telephone conversation was also held with a headteacher of a local primary school.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009 and was an amalgamation of three predecessor schools. It is sponsored by Barrow Sixth Form College, Furness College and the University of Cumbria. The academy operates on two sites which are over a mile apart and which were formerly predecessor schools. The buildings on one site are divided by a main public road. Both sites cater for students aged between 11 and 16. It is planned that the academy will move into a single new building in January 2013.

A majority of staff currently working at the academy transferred from the predecessor schools. By the end of its first year, 18 teachers had left the academy and 15 had joined it. Two new members of the senior leadership team were appointed at the start of the current

January 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

academic year. There are 1,501 students on roll and the rate by which students leave and enter the academy other than at the start and end of the academic year is low. The number of students admitted into Year 7 is lower than those leaving Year 11, which reflects the decline in the local student population. However, the most recent intake of students into Year 7 in 2010 was oversubscribed. There are a smaller proportion of girls at the academy than is usually found in other schools. Around 25% of students are known to be eligible for free school meals which is higher than average. A similar proportion of students have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Fifty-six students have a statement of special educational needs, a proportion of the academy's population which is above average. Very few students are from minority ethnic groups and very few speak English as an additional language. The academy's main specialism is sport. Its second specialism in applied mathematics is currently under review.

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

Students enter the academy with levels of prior attainment at Key Stage 2 that are just below average. Fewer more-able students join the academy than is normally the case in other schools. In 2010, the percentage of students gaining five good GCSE grades was 58% which was well below average. The proportion of students who attained the key measure of five A* to C grades at GCSE level including English and mathematics was 33% which was also well below average and did not meet the academy's challenging targets. In both these key measures, girls performed more strongly than boys. Contributing factors to these weak results were a low level of attendance of Year 11 students and the difficulty in managing three different examination systems and curricula in mathematics which were inherited from the predecessor schools. The proportion of students who gained five or more A* to G grades at GCSE level was also well below average. Nevertheless, in a number of subjects such as biology, physical education, physics and vocational studies, the proportions of students gaining grades A* to C, and also the highest grades, were broadly in line with national averages. In art and design, the proportion gaining good grades was significantly above average. Students from minority ethnic groups and those with statements of special educational needs attained more highly than their national counterparts. The academy reacted to these results with useful initiatives that focused strongly on improving outcomes in English and mathematics. These are now paying off. Results in English Language for the current cohort in Year 11, gained by the early entry of students to examinations, are already 5% higher than those gained in 2010. Data provided by the academy indicate that results in mathematics are also set to improve.

The overall progress made by students, and most groups of students in Year 11 in 2010 was well below that expected. Some small groups of students, such as those who speak English as an additional language and those whose circumstances make them vulnerable made average progress. However, in lessons observed during the inspection, students made satisfactory progress overall and some made good progress in their learning. Progress was stronger in English than in mathematics.

Other relevant student outcomes

The attendance of students is low. The academy recognises this and has established a number of strategies to elicit improvement. Parents are more involved in exploring ways to improve their children's attendance. An education welfare officer was appointed at the start of the current academic year. The benefits of good attendance are conveyed through learning groups and assemblies. The academy rewards those who achieve 100% attendance and also sensibly rewards students whose attendance has reached a lower target as their attendance improves. Groups of students whose attendance is particularly low have been identified, given additional support and placed on improvement programmes. While these strategies are relatively recent and the full impact of them has yet to be seen, attendance has improved from 88.5% recorded in 2009/10 to the current figure of 90.6%. However, the academy acknowledges that this remains a major area for rapid and sustained improvement.

Behaviour around the academy and in classrooms is generally satisfactory. Students are cooperative, work well with each other and are polite to adults. The behaviour of a small minority of students disrupts some learning. The academy has strategies in place to improve behaviour including the development of an alternative curriculum and focused additional support, such as confidence building and behaviour-management programmes. Students commented that behaviour had improved since the establishment of the academy. Permanent exclusions have been significantly reduced. While fixed-term exclusions have also been reduced, they remain too high, including those for students known to be eligible for free school meals and for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The effectiveness of provision

Half of teaching observed during the monitoring inspection was satisfactory and half was good. This matches the academy's assessment of the quality of teaching. A higher proportion of good teaching was observed in Key Stage 3. Where teaching was good, resources were well designed and were used effectively to capture and retain students' interest. The pace of teaching was brisk. Probing questions were used to deepen students' learning and to check understanding. Group and paired work by students were well organised. Teachers used praise and encouragement well to promote their high expectations of behaviour and of the amount of work they expected to be completed. Students were focused, actively involved and enjoyed their learning. This was particularly evident in lessons in Year 7 classes where cooperation between students was a marked characteristic. When teaching was satisfactory work did not always challenge students sufficiently and there was often too much teacher talk which limited the amount of work students completed. The range of learning activities was restricted, as were students' opportunities to learn independently. Too often, work was not matched to the different needs of students. Students had few opportunities to explain their thinking or reflect upon their learning. Teachers plan to a common format but often planning, and subsequently teaching does not focus sufficiently on the progress students are making. Work is marked but not enough of it

offers clear enough or sufficient guidance on the next steps students must take to improve. There is also too much variability between subjects in the setting and assessment of homework.

In the first year of its life, the academy retained much of the curriculum pattern used in the predecessor schools in order to provide continuity for Year 11 students. The curriculum in Year 7 has a strong focus on the development of skills. There was a greater variety of approaches to teaching and learning within this year group than was seen in other year groups and a high degree of cooperative and learning skills between students. This reflects the good work the academy has carried out with its feeder primary schools in improving the transition experience for students new to Year 7. The quality of the early morning learning groups is variable. In the best practice, students are well prepared for the day's activities and sessions promote a positive work ethos. However, too many of these sessions lack focus. Working well with a wide range of partners, the academy has played a key role in improving the consistency and organisation of the transition process to higher education across the Furness area. The development of an appropriate alternative curriculum for selected groups in Key Stage 4 is having a positive impact on the attitudes, outcomes and attendance of these students. For example, a small number who were disengaged from learning have been re-engaged through programmes delivered by the Inclusion Team in the Learning Improvement Zones. Diploma and Young Apprenticeship courses now better meet the needs of an increasing number of students. Work with local colleges and work-based learning centres has promoted alternative pathways of learning well. The academy has well advanced plans to enable the Key Stage 4 curriculum to be taught over three years, rather than the current two. Systems to support students whose circumstances may have made them most vulnerable are well developed and some are starting to impact on students' attitudes and outcomes. Focused groups of Year 10 students have been given additional support to improve attendance and behaviour with some success.

A key focus for the sports specialism has been its work with other subjects to develop strategies to support disengaged and vulnerable students. At first, this focused on the core subjects but is now being expanded to include others. Another focus has been the development of strategies to raise attainment for students known to be eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The specialism has also worked well with primary schools to promote effective transition arrangements and pupils' health.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Due to the late signing of the funding agreement for the academy, time for senior leaders to prepare for the opening of the academy was very limited. Nonetheless, under the strong and determined leadership of the Principal, supported by the senior leadership team, there has been a relentless drive to improve academic outcomes, the quality of teaching, behaviour and attendance. An important part of this drive to raise standards has been a thoughtful and reflective review by senior leaders of how the academy performed in its first

year. This has informed the academy's broadly accurate self-evaluation of its own effectiveness. As a result, the academy knows where it must make improvements.

Job descriptions are in place as are performance management procedures for all staff. Those for teachers are appropriately focused on improving academic outcomes. A good level of accountability for staff has been established as line management structures are clear and staff know the academy's priorities. Arrangements for the safeguarding of students meet with current requirements and considerable funds have been spent to make one site more secure. Effective steps have been taken to deal with the challenge of working on two sites. A growing number of staff work across both locations. The leadership of the core subjects of English, mathematics and science has been strengthened by giving additional management responsibilities to a number of staff so that leaders are represented on both sites. This has improved communication and continuity within these subjects and ensured a greater equality of provision for students. Additional staff have been deployed to support house leaders and managers to help them provide a greater level of academic and pastoral guidance to students and to ensure its consistency on each site.

The academy reacted quickly to the weak exam results recorded in 2010. A new subject leader for English was appointed who reinvigorated the department and who moved swiftly to introduce measures to improve learning, the success of which are reflected in the improved results in this subject. Students now follow one curriculum in the mathematics department. An external consultant was deployed to review the department's work and a useful action plan has been drawn up. Mentoring systems for older students have been strengthened and additional learning and revision resources purchased. One-to-one tutoring of students who have fallen behind in their learning has been introduced in both mathematics and English, but also usefully in a number of other subjects, revision opportunities for students outside of the academy day have been increased.

Weaknesses in assessment procedures and the use of data procedures have been tackled. Rigorous checking of teacher assessments and exam data has provided more accurate information on the National Curriculum levels students are working at and on the progress they are making towards their targets. This information is now being better used to identify underperformance and to inform actions to improve learning, such as the reorganisation of teaching groups. It has also been used to inform parents of the progress their children are making and to alert them to underperformance.

A rigorous and well-developed system for checking the quality of teaching and learning has been established. This has provided the academy with a clear view of strengths and weaknesses in teaching and learning and helped improve teaching steadily. In joint observations of lessons, the findings of senior leaders were closely aligned to those of inspectors. Identified weaknesses in teaching are robustly and systematically tackled. A senior member of staff oversees the management of teaching and learning and effectively organises identified training needs. There has been a satisfactory level of training for staff on how to improve teaching. A teaching and learning contract has recently been rolled out throughout the academy. This was being shared with students during the monitoring visit

and usefully explains the academy's high expectations of both students and teachers. However, there is scope for training to focus more sharply on the active sharing of the best practice in teaching across all subjects.

The academy's development plan is comprehensive and regularly reviewed by senior leaders. Middle managers are accountable for the quality of teaching and learning within their areas, although there still remains too much variability in practice at this level. The academy is working to develop their skills through specific training. Subject leaders also evaluate the effectiveness of their departments and draw up departmental action plans. There is scope for evaluations to be more detailed and for some action plans to contain more milestones that would enable departments to gauge the progress they are making towards their targets and in improving teaching.

There has been a strong and coordinated drive to improve behaviour across the academy. Parents spoken to during the course of the inspection were strongly supportive of this development. Links with parents and the local community are being developed well and are overseen by a senior member of staff. Good relationships have been built up with the local primary feeder schools. Curriculum evenings are held to inform parents about activities aimed at improving attainment, such as revision opportunities in half term week. Parents spoken to during the inspection confirmed that they are kept well informed of developments and consulted, for example, on whether the new building should be on a single site.

Governors have a good overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the academy. They are informed and experienced and provide a sound level of challenge as well as support to the senior leadership team. They have taken the useful step of inviting more of the senior staff to attend the full governing meetings in order to build leadership capacity and strengthen accountability.

External support

The academy has used external consultants well to identify weaknesses in provision and to confirm the effectiveness of monitoring procedures. The academy's Improvement Partner visits regularly and produces good quality reports which identify clearly areas for improvement. Appropriate use has been made of resources provided by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and the National Challenge initiative to improve outcomes in English and mathematics. Two of the academy's sponsors provide good support too by providing opportunities for students to undertake vocational studies and diplomas.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards. The recent improvements in English results, attendance and behaviour, broadly accurate self-evaluation and steady improvements in teaching show that the academy has satisfactory capacity to improve.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise the attainment of students in Key Stage 4, especially in English and mathematics.
- Increase the proportion of good or better teaching.
- Improve attendance.
- Reduce the number of students being temporarily excluded.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Academies and Families. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mr Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dczf.gsi.gov.uk]