

28 February 2011

Mr D Saxton
Principal
Appleton Academy
Wilson Road
Wyke
Bradford
West Yorkshire
BD12 9PX

Dear Mr Saxton,

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Appleton Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 2 March 2011, 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, Vice-Principals and other staff, groups of pupils, the chair of governors, who represented the sponsors, and the School Improvement Partner.

Context

The academy provides education for pupils and students aged between three and 19. It opened in September 2009 and the sixth form opened in September 2010. Work on a new building to accommodate all ages has recently begun, but currently the academy is located on the two sites previously used by its predecessors, High Fernley primary school and Wyke Manor secondary school. The academy is sponsored by Bradford College and has no religious designation. Its specialisms are science and sport.

There are currently 779 on roll, including 104 children in the Early Years Foundation Stage, 174 in Years 1 to 6, 476 in Years 7 to 11 and 25 in the sixth form. Pupils and students come from a range of different backgrounds. The majority are of White British heritage and the proportion from minority-ethnic backgrounds is smaller than the national figure. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for free school meals is higher than the national

average. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities including those with a statement of special educational needs is about average. The academy attracts pupils of all abilities but, overall, the pupils' attainment on entry into all phases is below average.

The Principal of the academy was appointed from its inception. Prior to that, he had been seconded to support the predecessor secondary school during its final three years. The Vice-Principal who leads the primary phase was previously the primary school headteacher. A new Vice-Principal for the secondary phase was appointed in September 2009. Turnover of staff has been fairly low, but as the number of pupils has started to increase, new teachers and additional leaders have been appointed.

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

Attainment in the secondary phase has improved significantly since the academy opened, when compared with the predecessor school. However, the academy's leaders recognise that attainment by the end of Year 11 is still below the national average. Attainment has remained broadly average overall in the primary phase.

A significant proportion of children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills lower than is typical. As a result of continuing improvement to provision, children are currently making good progress. In 2010, a majority demonstrated good development by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. This good start is now being better sustained in Key Stages 1 and 2. Attainment in English and mathematics by the end of Year 6 has fluctuated, and dipped well below national averages in 2010, although the proportion of pupils achieving higher levels in writing and mathematics has increased and pupils' overall progress improved. The academy is alert to the factors affecting attainment, for example that, from an early age, boys and pupils known to be eligible for free school meals attain lower than girls. Suitable adjustments to provision are having a positive impact on language skills. A wider range of pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, are now making progress at or above the expected rate.

Lesson observations confirm that progress is accelerating in the primary phase. A more stimulating curriculum, combined with careful use of assessment and tracking, is helping to improve the quality of learning. Pupils are proud of their work and said that teachers make learning fun. They make rapid progress when teachers have high expectations of their potential and when lessons are planned and adapted on the basis of good knowledge of what the pupils already know and can do. Pupils understand what they have to do to improve in reading, writing and mathematics. Occasionally, however, the more-able pupils are insufficiently challenged. Handwriting is sometimes less well developed.

Last year, a much improved proportion of Year 11 students gained five passes at A* to C overall and five passes at A* to C including English and mathematics at GCSE. For the first time the academy's performance was in line with the national average on these key measures. There was a clear increase, too, in the number who attained at least two good

grades in science, and some optional subjects performed well. However, few students gained A* or A grades. Taking the results in English and mathematics of all students into account, their performance remained below the national average. Fewer students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and fewer girls with lower prior attainment, made the expected progress than did students in other groups. For a number of boys and girls who significantly underachieved, poor attendance was a factor.

According to the academy's careful assessments, Key Stage 4 results are not expected to rise significantly further in the near future, but students' progress is steadily improving. Learning observed across the secondary curriculum and age range was in general satisfactory and sometimes better. This included post-16 students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Students spoken to clearly felt they are making better progress now that staffing is more stable and they say more teaching is lively and effective. The quality of learning is, however, more variable in the secondary than in the primary phase. When lessons are engaging and clear expectations are well understood by the students, learning is of better quality. Students respond positively to teachers' efforts to gain their interest and motivate them, and most show concern to make good progress. However, students do not always make the most of opportunities for investigation or discussion, showing a lack of experience in independent learning.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Pupils in the primary phase thoroughly enjoy all the opportunities the academy provides. They are keen to help the academy to continue to improve, for example, by sharing their ideas for the curriculum. Pupils usually behave in a supportive way to each other. The youngest followed routines well; most made choices with confidence and played together happily. Older pupils were seen working well collaboratively and making sensitive peer assessments. Behaviour in observed lessons was good. However, rare instances of unacceptable behaviour, most often by boys, have led to an increase in the use of exclusion in the past year. A nurture group is helping pupils' self-control and readiness to learn.

In the secondary phase, behaviour and attitudes have improved. During less structured times of the day, students behave sensibly and they are polite. The use of fixed-term exclusions has reduced significantly from very high levels, although it is higher than in most schools. The reduction is partly the result of new provision combining learning support with an alternative curriculum on the academy site. Behaviour and engagement observed in lessons were at least satisfactory.

Attendance is below average, although it shows some improvement. In the primary phase it has remained average as a result of effective monitoring and early interventions. The attendance of secondary students has improved when compared with the predecessor school. The proportion of persistent absentees has been reduced but remains higher than average. Other than in Year 7, attendance in the secondary phase is low and improvement has not significantly accelerated in the past year.

Secondary students demonstrate loyalty to their academy and growing commitment to helping it to improve further. They see clear improvements in the management of behaviour. They feel very well supported and cared for by staff. Many students are developing new interests and getting involved in healthy activities because of the rich extended curriculum. Younger students appreciate the way new mixed-age tutor groups give them a feeling of belonging and help them form supportive relationships with older students. However, some older students did not feel their needs are as well met, or that their views influence the development of the academy significantly.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching is generally satisfactory. In the Early Years Foundation Stage and primary phase it is planned effectively, making good use of assessment to ensure suitably high expectations for progress. Interesting links are made across subjects that help pupils to understand the relevance of learning. Pupils understand the expectations made of them because teachers make effective use of clear success criteria for their work and sometimes involve pupils in framing them. Pupils work well with and without direct adult support at different times during a lesson. Good examples of questioning were seen. Relationships between staff and pupils are very positive and pupils are enthusiastic about their work. Rich opportunities for talk and role play in lessons support the development of the pupils' reading and writing. Activities are varied and accommodate the different levels at which pupils are working. However, occasionally the more-able pupils stay too long on tasks which they could easily do. Sometimes pupils' understanding of their task is not checked or younger children's focus drifts during a large group session.

Teaching in the secondary phase, including in the sometimes very small classes for post-16 students, is satisfactory overall. Much shows good or occasionally outstanding qualities, but overall it is more varied in quality than in the primary phase. Strengths observed include positive relationships which encouraged students to have a go and persist with problems. Many teachers used interestingly varied strategies to engage and motivate all students. The best lessons were sharply focussed and gave students a clear sense of direction; they featured clear explanations, well-managed opportunities for independent work and probing questioning that both checked and developed understanding. The observed teaching which fell short of being good lacked these same qualities and, as a result, students did not participate as actively or take as much independent responsibility. The teacher's talk sometimes took up too much time yet did not always leave students clear about what they needed to do to reach their targets; questioning did not enable pupils to articulate their thoughts fully; students were not encouraged to take a leading role in learning. Some teachers did not make full use of assessment information to adapt their plans and so meet the needs of all students. Lessons did not always have an urgent sense of purpose. Marking is variable: in some cases regularly done and helpful, with signs that students were acting upon the recommendations; but in others, cursory.

Improvements to the curriculum are contributing well to improving attitudes and progress. In the primary phase, themes such as 'Superheroes' and appealing texts stir strong interest in pupils. Literacy, numeracy and skills for independent learning are interwoven effectively in lessons. A performing arts specialist was seen to have a remarkable impact on the engagement of all the boys and girls in Year 3. The emphasis on speaking and listening, collaboration and reflection is meeting these pupils' needs well.

In the secondary phase the curriculum is developing well to meet students' needs and interests. A new creative and critical thinking course for Year 7 is building on the primary curriculum and aims to embed skills for learning. An increasing range of courses leading to qualifications other than GCSE has helped raise achievement and aspirations for many students, particularly boys. This is one reason why the proportion of students who do not enter education or employment has reduced significantly. Science and sport have led innovations and are now helping other subjects introduce similar vocational qualifications. New vocational courses in performing arts and health and social care are adding better balance, and appeal to girls as well as boys. The new sixth form caters well for individual interests and is helping to promote higher aspirations. Students are appreciative of the bespoke provision and an early survey shows most are at least satisfied with its quality.

The science and sports specialism has contributed well to these developments, and also to the extended learning programme, which is a developing strength. Staff make sure there is something enjoyable for everyone, for example, by funding outdoor and adventurous pursuits and responding to students' enthusiasm for drama. There are opportunities for accreditation. However, the academy does not currently monitor the involvement of the groups of students most prone to underachievement.

Additional support and pastoral care have been reorganised to improve behaviour, achievement and attendance. Concerted efforts by primary phase staff have sustained attendance at an average level and begun to strengthen relationships with parents and carers. The academy is now seeking to involve a wider range of parents in supporting learning at home. In the secondary phase, reducing off-site learning has had a positive effect on attendance. The careful introduction of mixed-age tutor groups this year is creating a friendly and supportive context for guidance and learning basic and life skills. Personalised learning provision has successfully reintegrated some students with poor attendance records. A recent productive change is the use of specialist teachers to lead personalised learning in the student support centre. Observation confirmed that those who attend this provision are making more progress, although assessment data indicate there are still some with special educational needs and/or disabilities who are not making the progress expected. Staff stress to students and families the link between regular attendance and good achievement. Absences are monitored and followed up with a range of interventions, and there are incentives for attendance. A parental involvement worker has been introduced, following the model used in the primary phase. However, these intervention strategies have not yet produced a strong shift in attitudes among students.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The academy's sponsors, governing body and senior leaders have established a clear drive for improvement. Senior staff are firmly focussed on fulfilling pupils' potential to achieve more and are providing better choices and opportunities. This has helped to raise attainment and expectations across the academy. Everybody is clear that there is further to go, ambitious targets have been set and clear strategic plans are being implemented at an effective pace. Careful progress tracking triggers interventions and adaptations to provision. Rising attainment in the secondary phase, accelerating progress in the primary phase and some narrowing gaps between groups demonstrate the capacity the academy has to improve further.

The academy's leaders recognise the priority for improving the impact of teaching on all outcomes. Staffing is now largely stable. Much effort has gone into establishing rigorous monitoring of teaching. Senior leaders analyse the strengths and weaknesses of teaching accurately and identify clearly how it could improve. The role of curriculum leaders and the use of student feedback in evaluation are developing this year. Nonetheless, a higher proportion of good learning is needed to accelerate progress. Some teachers have been trained to give training on effective strategies, helping to develop potential leaders and resources for professional development. However, there is scope to accelerate improvement: currently, for example, inadequate teaching has been effectively targeted by individual action plans, but satisfactory teaching has not.

Thorough, unflinching self-evaluation has informed developments and helped to sustain and strengthen improvements. Dynamic leadership in the primary phase has inspired staff to work effectively together to design a curriculum which pupils are finding more relevant and interesting. Links across the phases for staff and pupils are developing constructively and beginning to give substance to the vision of an all-age academy. For example, Psychology is being taught to post-16 students by the Early Years Foundation Stage leader, and the leader of Year 6 is guiding innovations in the Year 7 and 8 curriculum. Systems and structures for inclusion have been developed thoughtfully. Available evidence indicates that systems to keep children and young people safe meet requirements and policies are kept under review. The academy is becoming more outward-looking, for example, supporting curriculum development in five local primary schools, within and beyond the specialist subjects. Links with parents and carers and the wider community are developing.

External support

The School Improvement Partner provides robust analysis of the academy's progress and has assisted quality assurance in key areas.

The support of the sponsors, Bradford College, takes several practical forms. With several common interests, the sponsor organisation and the academy are sharing resources and expertise in science, sport and teacher training.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve achievement by replicating the best practice seen in lessons, so that a higher proportion of them demand more active participation from pupils, secure their clear understanding of how to achieve targets and enable them to lead and manage their own learning.
- Improve attendance in the secondary phase by ensuring strategies and interventions have more impact on students' attitudes.

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

Yours sincerely

Ms Susan Bowles

Her Majesty's Inspector

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