

CfBT Inspection Services T 0300 1231231
Suite 22 enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
West Lancs Investment Centre www.ofsted.gov.uk
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

Direct T 01695 566 852
Direct F 01695 729320
chuxley@cfbt.com
www.cfbt-inspections.com



11 March 2011

Mrs C Mann
Principal
Birkenhead High School Academy
86 Devonshire Place
Oxton
Prenton
Wirral
Merseyside
CH43 1TY

Dear Mrs Mann

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection visit to Birkenhead High School Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Cathryn Kirby HMI to your academy on 9 and 10 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, senior leaders, heads of faculty, progress leaders, groups of pupils from the junior school, senior school and sixth form, the Chair of the Local Governing Body, and had a telephone discussion with the Chief Executive Officer of the Girls' Day School Trust, which is the academy's sponsor.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009 in the buildings of the predecessor school, which was a fee-paying independent school for girls aged 3–18 years. Construction work for new buildings on the same site has just commenced. The headmistress of the predecessor school was the Principal of the academy for its first year. The current Principal took up post in September 2010. An appointment has recently been made to the vacant post of Vice-Principal. The senior leadership team has been operating one member short for over a year. The model of governance is through an academy trust board and a local governing body whose recently appointed chair is also a member of the trust board. The academy's specialisms are music and mathematics.

January 2011

PROTECT-INSPECTION



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

The academy retains the predecessor school's structure of a junior school for girls aged 3–11 years and a senior school that includes the sixth form. The arrangements for admission of pupils into the senior part of the school mean there are more girls in Years 7 and 8 than in Years 9 to 11. Numbers on roll are 294 in the junior school, 373 in Years 7 to 11 and 128 in the sixth form. Around 5% of the pupils have special educational needs and/or disabilities, which is low. A similarly low proportion is known to be eligible for free school meals. Nearly 5% of pupils are of minority ethnic heritage. Very few pupils speak English as an additional language.

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

Children currently in the Nursery have more highly developed skills and knowledge than is typical for their age. Similarly, those pupils joining in Year 7 (Upper Third) or the sixth form have above average prior attainment. By the end of each key stage, pupils' attainment is well above average, most notably at GCSE and A level, as reflected in the academy's first set of public examination results in 2010. All of the Year 11 (Upper Fifth) pupils attained at least five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics and nearly three quarters of the A-level results were at grades A* to B. At least 90% of the pupils in Year 6 (Lower Third) reached the standards expected at age 11, Level 4, in English and mathematics. The academy fell short of its targets for pupils reaching Level 5.

The Year 11 pupils in 2010 made strong progress from their starting points five years earlier. The predecessor school did not have rich sets of national assessment data that are commonplace in maintained schools. Consequently, there are no reliable measures of progress for whole year groups of pupils in the junior school. A priority for the academy has been to establish suitable assessment systems and to work with staff on the accurate assessment of pupils' attainment in Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. For instance, the Key Stage 1 teacher assessments will be externally moderated this year.

The quality of learning in lessons is at least satisfactory and often good. Pupils of all ages are attentive and cooperative learners who respond well to structured opportunities for discussion and group work. Interesting activities generate a buzz of enthusiasm. The youngest children enjoy a range of practical activities. In some classes, learning is passive with talk limited to teachers' questions and responses from individual pupils, often the minority who volunteer answers. Nevertheless, pupils' diligent attitudes to learning and strong basic skills, particularly literacy, make a significant positive contribution to their learning, even when pupils are not stimulated or challenged as much as they might be. Not all have opportunities to learn independently or apply their knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The predecessor school's long-established traditional ethos of an enjoyable, rich education that develops confident, articulate, considerate and friendly girls and young women has continued through into the academy. Pupils value highly the wide range of extra-curricular



activities, trips and visit that enrich their education. Personal and social development is strong. Pupils are mature for their years; they get on exceptionally well together, and with their teachers, and this contributes significantly to their well-being and enjoyment. They say they feel very safe in the academy and know adults to whom they can turn if they were to have concerns. Behaviour in lessons and around the academy is excellent. Pupils have an increasing number of opportunities to take responsibility, as form representatives or school councillors for instance, or in providing support for younger pupils. However, teachers do not always capitalise on pupils' potential to take more responsibility for their own learning. Attendance is above average in the junior school and high in Years 7 to 11. It is satisfactory in the sixth form.

Pupils who spoke with inspectors value highly the quality of relationships they have with staff and other pupils. Older pupils spoke warmly about the strong sense of community the academy brings. Sixth-formers value the advice and guidance that leads to well-informed plans for the future and they appreciate the readily available informal support from their subject teachers.

Pupils are excited about the new building and value the fact that their views have been sought to influence some of the design details. In the autumn term, the academy used questionnaires about its work to seek the views of pupils and their parents and carers. The responses from parents and carers and pupils in the junior school were very positive. The picture from pupils in the senior school was considerably less so. For instance, over a quarter of Key Stage 4 pupils disagreed with statements about knowing how well they were doing, and on adults explaining how to improve their work and being interested in their views. While these concerns were not reflected in pupils' discussions with inspectors, leaders have not acted with sufficient urgency to explore and tackle any underlying issues.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors observed a mix of satisfactory and good teaching in the 27 lessons visited across the academy. The findings suggest that the academy's view of the proportion of teaching that promotes consistently good learning is slightly over-generous, although lessons observed jointly with senior staff showed close agreement on the features of the teaching. Strengths of the teaching include teachers' secure subject knowledge which underpins the good quality explanations and accurate use of subject-specific vocabulary and, in the senior school, a thorough understanding of examination requirements. Good relationships create an atmosphere conducive to learning across the academy.

In the best lessons, a brisk pace of learning was promoted effectively through well sequenced and interesting activities. Pupils were encouraged to work collaboratively and take responsibility for their learning. Regular checks were made to ensure that learning was taking place; for example through the skilled use of questioning techniques and by circulating around the class while pupils were working to check their progress and pick up on misconceptions. Opportunities were taken to probe understanding, reinforce key learning

points and consolidate prior learning. Activities allowed pupils to apply their learning to new problems or different contexts.

Where teaching was satisfactory rather than good, some of these elements were missing or implemented less effectively. Sometimes pupils would have benefited from greater challenge given their level of understanding, strong basic skills, and ease with which they completed set tasks. In some lessons, more emphasis was placed on the completion of tasks than on ensuring regular and rigorous checks on learning. The extent to which pupils are encouraged to discuss and share their ideas to develop their reasoning varies widely. Lesson planning did not routinely make use of assessment information to ensure activities were well matched to pupils' starting points and needs; some good practice on this was observed in the junior school.

The academy is working to develop teachers' use of assessment information. Their skills in the use of assessment to support learning vary, for instance in ensuring lesson planning always meets the full range of pupils' learning needs and abilities; in the range of strategies to establish pupils' starting points and check and probe learning throughout the lesson. The quality of feedback on pupils' work varies. Much is regular. Some good practice in the use of curricular targets and self-assessment by pupils was observed, but such strategies are not consistent across the academy.

The curriculum meets pupils' potential and high aspirations. Academic programmes provide good breadth. A review of the curriculum has led to some developments including the planned introduction of lessons for personal, social and health education and greater choice of modern languages. In the junior school, particular strengths are English, the creative arts and humanities but mathematics and science are not equally visible in some junior classes. Mathematics is a current area of development in the junior school. The academy has recently improved the identification of pupils' special educational needs, drawing on the expertise of staff from a local special school. The roles of teaching assistants in the junior school have been reviewed appropriately to give greater emphasis on supporting learning. At present, there are no teaching assistants in the senior school.

Across the age range, pupils participate enthusiastically in the comprehensive enrichment programme. In particular, the diverse opportunities provided by the vibrant and high profile music specialism, the strong emphasis on and participation in team sports, and the very high uptake of the Duke of Edinburgh Award add significant value to pupils' enjoyment, well-being and contribution to the academy's community. The mathematics specialism is in the early stages of development.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The academy has been successful in maintaining high attainment and the predecessor school's valued ethos throughout a period of change. The pace of establishing leadership and management practices has increased significantly since September 2010, despite the senior leadership team being short of a vice-principal. A new staffing and leadership

structure, devised during the academy's first year of operation, has been implemented and refined; a new build is underway; and a review of the curriculum has been undertaken.

Self-evaluation by the Principal is broadly accurate. She has identified a number of key priorities for improving the quality of provision, maintaining high standards and maximising the potential of every pupil. The academy has introduced self-evaluation by heads of faculty. The documents tend to evaluate the effectiveness of subjects or key stages in the junior school rather too positively often because judgements on the quality of teaching tend to be linked to attainment rather than measures of progress. Middle level leaders are conducting a range of appropriate monitoring activities, such as scrutiny of pupils' work, but here again there is scope to probe the depth and quality of learning and use the evidence to pose incisive questions about the quality of provision and how it might be improved.

The academy has not been 'data rich' in the past. A sensible set of systems has been developed for setting targets for each pupil and tracking attainment and progress. The academy acknowledges that work remains on improving the accuracy of teachers' assessments in relation to National Curriculum levels and in checking that all targets are suitably ambitious. Progress leaders use the data collected half-termly to pick up quickly on potential underachievement. Discussions between staff and pupils lead to short-term targets being set and followed up. Leadership and management are developing well in the sixth form, founded on knowing pupils well, and on setting and monitoring appropriate priorities.

The academy's development plan is detailed and prioritises important areas such as curriculum and pedagogy, assessment of learning, and self-evaluation. The plan is clear about the actions to be taken, many of which are sensible, but the 'impact outcome criteria' are not easily measured and do not include milestones to check progress. The plan does not include monitoring and evaluation arrangements or details of training needs. The approach to improving the quality of teaching is not as systematic as it needs to be. Ideas and good practice are shared in the teaching and learning group, but membership is voluntary. Senior leaders have conducted two rounds of brief visits to lessons for all staff. These have provided leaders with an overview of the quality of teaching and are creating a culture in which teaching and learning are discussed. However, the visits do not form a systematic sequence of short-term foci to help build more rapid improvement. Areas for development for individual teachers are not identified sharply enough or followed through quickly to improve practice.

A new Chair and Vice-Chair of the Local Governing Body have recently been appointed. The chair has a clear grasp of the importance of pupils' progress and the teaching that leads to it. He is seeking to increase the involvement of local governors and has requested training from the sponsor. The academy trust board's role centres on strategic leadership and legal responsibilities. The two boards might usefully consider how best to support and challenge the academy in improving the quality and consistency of learning and teaching.

External support



The academy is drawing appropriately on external support for the curriculum, for assessment and for developing middle level leadership, making effective use of local authority staff and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Input from consultants on teaching and learning and special education needs provision has been beneficial.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Involve all staff in a systematic approach to improving learning and teaching across the academy, ensuring weaknesses and inconsistencies are identified and tackled, and best practice shared.
- Improve teachers' and leaders' understanding and use of attainment and progress data.
- Explore and act upon pupils' views of the academy's work, particularly in the senior school.
- Strengthen the cycle of monitoring, evaluation and development planning by making better use of the outcomes of rigorous monitoring activities.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, Paul Hann, 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

cc Chair of the Governing Body
The Academies Group, DfE [Paul.hann@education.gsi.gov.uk]