

Serco Inspections
Boundary House
2 Wythall Green Way
Middle Lane
BIRMINGHAM
West Midlands
B47 6LW

OFSTED
T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

SERCO
Direct T 0121 683 2888

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Ms Zoe King
Principal
The Basildon Lower Academy
Timberlog Close
Timberlog Lane
Basildon
SS14 1UX

Dear Ms King

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Basildon Lower Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Ian Seath HMI to your academy on Tuesday 29 and Wednesday 30 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 inspection was a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative. The Basildon Upper Academy was inspected at the same time.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Executive Principal, the Principals of the upper and lower academies, senior and middle leaders, two groups of students and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

The Basildon Lower and Upper Academies opened together in September 2009 on the sites of two predecessor schools. Both are part of The Basildon Academies Trust, sponsored by the Stanton Lane Trust. They are led by an Executive Principal and share a number of staff. New buildings and refurbishment on the Lower Academy site were completed earlier this year. Year 10 students were accommodated on the Lower Academy site until new buildings were completed on the Upper Academy site in February 2011. The 927 students in Years 7 to 9 are taught and cared for in small groups in purpose-built colleges. The academy is currently under-subscribed. It

serves a local community where the level of deprivation and the number of students eligible for free school meals, at 33%, is higher than that found nationally. The vast majority of students are White British; the proportion from minority ethnic backgrounds is below the national average. The percentage of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is lower than average but a higher proportion than average has a statement of special educational need. The majority of staff transferred to the academy from the predecessor school. Since then, the academy has experienced difficulties in recruiting teachers particularly in mathematics. Some staff have left the academy and a small number of temporary teachers have been employed. A Principal and a vice-principal have left the academy. The current Principal has resigned. A new Principal has been appointed to lead both the upper and lower academies and a deputy principal will be appointed to oversee the Lower Academy from September 2011. The academy specialises in mathematics and enterprise.

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

Students join the academy in Year 7 with prior attainment that is well below the national average. As they move through Key Stage 3 their progress is well below that expected and, as a result, the standards attained at the end of Year 9 are exceptionally low. Inspectors found that in too many lessons students' learning and progress were inadequate. Analysis of performance data indicates that students with the highest prior attainment make the least progress. Where data are available, they show that the very low attainment and rates of progress have not improved since the academy opened. With a few notable exceptions seen in art, physical education and some vocational classes, students' personal study skills and ability to work alongside others are poor. Too many students are missing from lessons due to poor attendance. Those that do attend regularly find that their learning is often interrupted by the poor behaviour of a minority of students. As a consequence, most students are under-equipped to make the transition into Key Stage 4.

Standards attained in English improved slightly in 2010 but declined further in mathematics. The attainment of girls declined notably both in English and mathematics, although boys' attainment improved. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make much slower progress than their peers. However, those categorised as requiring support at 'school action plus' level or those having a statement of special educational needs make better progress than expected because of the effective support they receive. Those students eligible for free school meals make slower progress than their peers. The academy's specialism in enterprise is helping to promote students' achievement; almost three quarters of Year 9 students attained the equivalent of a half-GCSE qualification in enterprise in 2010. The mathematics specialism makes a limited contribution to raising overall achievement.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students say that they enjoy many of their classes but that too many are disrupted by the unacceptable behaviour of a minority of students which impacts badly on their learning. Observations of lessons carried out jointly by inspectors and senior staff found that learning is often disrupted by students calling out, by excessive chatter and a general lack of respect shown for others which often goes unchecked by teachers. During lesson changeovers students' punctuality is poor; a small minority of students are often found wandering the buildings long after lessons have begun. Improved behaviour management procedures have recently been introduced and the proportion of students removed from lessons and referred to the Phoenix centre is beginning to reduce. However, these 'consequences' are not applied consistently by all staff which is undermining their overall impact and effectiveness.

Attendance is well below the national average and the proportion of students persistently absent is exceptionally high. The most recent attendance data show this situation to be worsening. Procedures for monitoring attendance lack rigour because it is unclear who has overall responsibility for improving and maintaining it. Students say that they feel safe and that bullying is not widespread but it is present. When asked, they were unsure who to approach to resolve this. The number of short-term exclusions is high, and includes a disproportionately high number of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The effectiveness of provision

Observations by inspectors confirmed the findings of the academy's own monitoring which shows that the quality of teaching varies considerably and too much is inadequate. A number of less experienced but enthusiastic and well-organised teachers accelerate students' progress by setting very high expectations and planning learning that stimulates their interest. They encourage students to work together in groups and to make regular contributions during group discussion. Students are invited to demonstrate their understanding on interactive whiteboards and to regularly assess how well they are doing. Elsewhere, however, too many lessons fail to capture students' interest or challenge inappropriate behaviour: consequently, progress is too slow. Expectations are too low so students do a minimal amount of work and show little concern for the quality of their written work. An over-reliance on temporary staff is having an adverse effect upon students' relations with teachers and their motivation to apply themselves and work hard.

A wide range of assessment data is collated but this includes some inaccuracies because it is not moderated internally or validated by comparing it with data from other schools. Only a few teachers use this information to plan learning which means that tasks are often either too easy or too difficult for students. The transfer of some more effective teachers to the Upper Academy to prepare Year 11 students for

examinations later this year is having a detrimental affect on the Lower Academy's efforts to improve the quality of teaching and on students' continuity of learning. Many teachers have taught their classes for only a short period of time due to recent curriculum changes. Senior leaders have decided that the introduction of GCSE and BTEC courses in Year 9 will not be repeated next year, mainly because students lack a thorough grounding in basic literacy and numeracy skills and would benefit from a full three-year Key Stage 3 course. Similarly, a commitment to provide students with additional weekly mathematics lessons is not generating higher levels of achievement because the quality of teaching in mathematics is not good enough. A good range of enrichment opportunities on Friday afternoons is enjoyed by approximately half of all students, but the other half elect not to stay in school which undermines its purpose and impact.

Students within each year group are organised into colleges and taught in a dedicated learning zone. These are led by a non-teaching college manager. The idea is that every student will be known as an individual. In practice, this has led to some variability in the quality of care, guidance and support and a lack of clarity about who should be held accountable for students' poor attendance and behaviour. Suitable care and support is provided for those students that attend regularly. Staff work very effectively to fully include students with disabilities. Younger students are unclear about the guidance they receive relating to sex education and how to avoid the risks to their health and well-being.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The academy has experienced a series of difficulties since its opening and remains in a period of significant change. The disruption caused by staffing changes, new buildings and the need to merge students from two different predecessor schools has impeded its overall development. Senior leaders have had to commit a significant amount of their time to stabilising arrangements for timetabling, staffing and general day-to-day operations. Despite their commitment and ambitions for the academy, their sustained efforts have had little impact on raising standards. The academy has a big team of assistant principals and pastoral and subject leaders, but they are not being rigorously held to account for the standards achieved in their subjects or for the behaviour, attendance and attitudes of the students they are deployed to look after. The ineffectiveness of leaders and managers to deliver the planned improvements is reflected in the outcomes for students which are inadequate. Leaders are not demonstrating the academy's sufficient capacity to improve.

A detailed development plan is in place and prioritises many of the issues the academy needs to address, but this is not based on an accurate evaluation of the academy's current strengths and weaknesses. It sets ambitious targets for improvement but is not explicit about how inadequate teaching, poor behaviour and

low attendance will be promptly addressed. Governors have a realistic view of the current effectiveness of the academy and acknowledge that it is not improving at a sufficient rate. They are monitoring its work more closely and have placed leaders and managers under much greater scrutiny. They ensure that safeguarding arrangements are secure.

External support

The support provided by the School Improvement Partner is welcomed and valued by the Executive Principal. The academy has sought additional support particularly in mathematics from commercial providers.

Main Judgements

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

- Increase attendance and reduce persistent absence rates as a matter of urgency, so that they are much closer to national averages by:
 - clarifying the roles and responsibilities of staff responsible for monitoring attendance and setting them challenging targets to improve and maintain it
 - giving one senior leader fully responsible for monitoring the actions taken to raise attendance and evaluating the impact and effectiveness of staff responsible for improving it
 - gaining the full support and commitment of parents and carers to ensure that their child attends on a regular basis
 - ensuring that students' views are heard and taken into account.

- Raise achievement by:
 - reviewing Key Stage 3 provision to ensure that all students are fully equipped with a firm foundation of literacy and numeracy skills and are suitably prepared for learning in Key Stage 4
 - requiring teachers of all subjects to make explicit reference in their planning to show how they will reinforce students' learning of basic skills, and by checking that they deliver them in lessons
 - providing all staff with an accurate baseline of students' ability on entry in Year 7 and by monitoring the quality of their tracking to gauge how well students are progressing
 - moderating teachers' assessments within departments and with other local schools to improve the validity of performance data.

- Improve the quality of teaching by:

- eradicating the high proportion of inadequate teaching so that it is at least satisfactory throughout the academy
 - empowering the most effective teachers to lead developments and share best practice in order to increase the proportion of good teaching
 - instilling in all staff the collective need to apply behaviour management procedures consistently so that students fully understand the expectations of them and know the consequences they will face if they misbehave
 - raising teachers' expectations of students and providing them with interesting, enjoyable and challenging lessons.
- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
- clarifying the respective roles of the Principal and the Executive Principal
 - thoroughly evaluating the academy's current strengths and weaknesses, and using this information to inform a clear and succinct plan to secure rapid improvements within the timescales facing the academy
 - embedding the new procedures to manage behaviour, regularly checking that they are being implemented consistently and challenging staff when inconsistencies occur
 - implementing revised plans with clear timescales to ensure that all students in the lower academy follow a suitable timetable matched to their needs and interests and that students currently in Year 9 understand fully what courses they will pursue in September 2011
 - improving line-management and performance-management arrangements so that all leaders, managers and staff are held fully accountable for the outcomes achieved by students.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, 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

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector