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19 May 2011

Mrs K Popratnjak  
Principal  
North Birmingham Academy  
395 College Road  
Birmingham  
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Dear Mrs Popratnjak

## **Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of North Birmingham Academy**

### **Introduction**

Following my visit to your academy on 17 and 18 May 2011, with Joan Hewitt HMI, 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 Principal, senior staff, groups of students, the Chair of the Local Governing Body and a representative of the sponsors. Telephone contact was made with your school improvement partner.

### **Context**

The North Birmingham Academy opened in the buildings of the predecessor school, College High Specialist Arts School, in January 2010. The academy is sponsored by E-ACT. The headteacher of the predecessor school became principal of the academy. The majority of teachers also transferred to the academy, although there had been considerable turnover in recent years with only six current teachers being associated with the school before 2005. The academy has specialisms in English and the arts. It also has a strong community focus. The student roll is rising and the new Year 7 in September 2011 is likely to be very close to your admission limit. The sixth form reopened in September 2010 and is also growing with over 100 students currently

enrolled on courses. Work on new buildings is planned to commence soon and be completed early in 2013. The academy has recently received two 'leading aspect' awards for the induction of newly qualified teachers and work on the inclusion of students and their personal development.

The academy is broadly average in size. Almost two thirds of students are known to be eligible for free school meals. Two thirds of students come from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds and over a quarter speak English as an additional language. A higher than average proportion of students has special educational needs and/or disabilities, and an increasing number have a statement of special educational needs. Many students come from areas of significant social disadvantage.

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

The academy has accelerated the trend of improvement in achievement started in the predecessor school. In 2010, the attainment of Year 11 students exceeded the challenging targets set by the academy and many key indicators were in line with the average nationally. Over 80% of students achieved at least five higher GCSE grades which was well above average. The capped and total points scores per student were also above average. The percentage of students achieving five higher grades including English and mathematics also improved to the minimum target set by the government but remained well below average. Students made good progress from their starting points, including those with a range of specific needs. The gap between the performance of girls and boys narrowed. The progress of students from white British backgrounds also improved and was significantly better than that found nationally. This substantial improvement arose because of the academy's drive to improve the curriculum and teaching.

The academy has developed a rigorous system for assessing students' performance and progress. The information is collated and analysed regularly in considerable detail. The data for 2011, based on early entry for some GCSE and BTEC courses, indicate that current Year 11 students are on track to improve on the results from 2010. This is especially the case in English and mathematics which are likely to exceed the national minimum target. The results for Year 9 and Year 10 students confirm this improving trend. These predicted results would place the academy in the top 25% of similar schools. Sixth form students are also on track to achieve their targets but most are still in the first full year of their course.

In the 20 lessons observed students made mostly good progress. They show positive attitudes to learning and settle to work promptly. They work together well in pairs and small groups, enjoying discussion and practical tasks. However, in a small number of lessons, students are too passive and do not take opportunities to demonstrate their learning or are not involved by the teacher. Increasingly, students are confident in assessing their own work and that of their peers.

## **Other relevant pupil outcomes**

Students' behaviour has improved significantly. They behave well in lessons, showing increasing self-discipline and good concentration on their learning. Students say they feel safe and that the academy cares for them well. The new behaviour code has been greeted enthusiastically. One Year 8 student remarked, 'lessons are calm and everyone knows how to behave.' Systems for managing behaviour are a strength in the academy. The impact of greater clarity of expectations and consistent application of the policy is exemplified in the reduction of fixed term exclusions. These have fallen from 376 in the last year of the predecessor school to 160 last year and to 108 so far this year. The academy has excluded one student permanently this year. However, behaviour in corridors and around the school is occasionally boisterous.

The academy has worked hard to improve students' attendance through an unrelenting focus on its importance to learning. Current attendance is high and this is consistent across all year groups. The proportion of students who struggle to attend school regularly is below that found nationally. Students enjoy their lessons and say they feel adults care about them. They are clear that they can go to any adult for help and they will be well-supported. Sixth form students speak warmly of the guidance and opportunities open to them. They are enthusiastic about their success and a significant number are on track to be the first in their family to attend university.

## **The effectiveness of provision**

The quality of teaching has improved steadily since the academy opened. Of the 20 lessons observed, two thirds were judged good or outstanding and none were inadequate. This closely matched the academy's own evaluation of teaching. Staff have developed a rigorous system for monitoring the quality of teaching and analysing the findings to inform training plans for teachers. As a result, there has been a regular programme of professional development, carefully focused on specific aspects of teaching and assessment. The move to longer units for teaching, sometimes of two or three hours, has prompted improvements in lesson planning. Teachers set clear objectives and share these with students. Objectives are often linked to students' target levels or grades. Relationships in lessons are good and students are encouraged to learn through a wide range of different activities. In the best lessons, teachers use questions well to check students' understanding and to develop their ideas but this is not yet consistent across the academy. Most lessons are paced appropriately and students' interest maintained. However, despite learning objectives often being matched to students' differing abilities, too often they all complete the same task and use the same materials.

Teachers' use of assessment to foster learning has also improved. Teachers link learning to particular levels or grades, using clear criteria. Students are encouraged to assess their own performance using the criteria and also to review their progress. Students know their targets and have a good understanding of their current performance. Teachers mark students' work regularly. Some provide very thorough and helpful comments which advise students on exactly what they need to do to improve but there are also occasions where comments focus too much on effort and organisation and too little on the next steps in improving work.

The curriculum effectively meets the needs of students, including those in the sixth form, and promotes increasingly high aspirations. The academy has successfully introduced a wide range of courses and qualifications which have stimulated the improvement in outcomes for students. These courses are now being offered flexibly with some students achieving GCSE equivalent grades well before the end of Year 11 and sometimes in Year 9. The longer lessons which the academy has recently introduced are a key element in accelerating progress. Students study topics in depth and have time to apply what they have learnt. This has promoted deeper thinking and enabled students and teachers to assess progress accurately.

Students enter the academy with low levels of literacy. Recent work to promote the development of literacy across the curriculum is promising but is too recent to have had significant impact. Consequently, opportunities to extend students' vocabulary and ability to offer extended answers are not fully exploited. Students who speak English as an additional language, especially those at an early stage, are well-supported by a dedicated team. However, this effective work is not consistently extended to lessons and occasionally these students struggle to access some of the learning.

The impact of the academy's specialisms in English and the arts is good. Teachers in the specialisms have contributed strongly to improving the quality of teaching through peer coaching. The arts specialism has also been effective in promoting better communication with parents and carers, particularly where students' circumstances make them vulnerable. For example, the academy recently involved some of these parents and carers in performing as a choir.

The academy provides excellent support, guidance and care for students, particularly those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Sophisticated and robust systems enable the academy to monitor the behaviour, learning and attendance of students along with a holistic view of their needs. This detailed and tailored work, ensuring that any interventions are carefully targeted and avoiding duplication, is having a dramatic impact on improving attendance and behaviour. It is further supported by strong relationships with a range of outside agencies. Consequently students feel very safe. There are clear examples of students who have been supported in overcoming significant behaviour and attendance difficulties to excel academically and develop strong personal skills.

## **The effectiveness of leaders and managers**

The principal and senior staff set a very clear vision for the academy, strongly focused on raising achievement. Expectations of students and staff are exceptionally clear and have helped to promote buoyant morale and a pride in the academy. Staff understand the academy's aims and show considerable commitment to implementing agreed approaches. Students speak very positively about the changes in the quality of their experience since the academy opened and their increasing opportunities to comment on how provision might improve further, such as student voice activities and 'learning detective' roles. The academy has a relevant and concise plan for improvement, successfully informed by close analysis of current outcomes and provision. The cycle of monitoring and evaluation is extremely rigorous, well-structured and involves a range of staff. Teaching is monitored through regular paired observations of lessons, brief visits to monitor specific activities and scrutiny of students' work. The senior team have clearly defined roles and work together very effectively. Middle leaders, many of whom are recently appointed, are committed to improving the quality of outcomes in their areas and readily share effective practice. The first year of the academy has brought improvements in many key aspects of its work and outcomes for students, and demonstrates its accelerating capacity to improve further.

Senior staff and the governing body have a clear understanding of the developing strengths of the academy. Regular review against a set of challenging targets ensures a strong sense of accountability and ongoing refinement of strategies to promote improvement. The local governing body is well constituted with a full range of relevant expertise and representation. Its chair has a thorough appreciation of the academy's strengths and the areas for further improvement. At the time of the visit, important safeguarding requirements were fully met. In fact, academy staff provide advice to other schools in this area.

## **External support**

The academy receives effective and continuing support from its sponsor and the school improvement partner. This has been particularly helpful in moderating judgements on teaching and identifying aspects of teaching and assessment for attention. The academy's progress is rigorously and regularly reviewed. Staff take a full part in the networks, promoted by E-ACT, which focus on specific areas of responsibility. The academy now passes on good practice in improving attendance and approaches to safeguarding to other academies. It also works increasingly closely with local primary schools and its community. The academy has commissioned relevant training and support from the specialist schools and academies trust and local agencies to develop particular aspects of its work.

## **Main Judgements**

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

## **Priorities for further improvement**

- Increase further the rates of progress of students in English and mathematics to beyond those expected nationally and move attainment close to the national average.
- Ensure that all teachers match tasks and materials more closely to the differing abilities of students to reflect the specific objectives set for them.
- Improve the consistency of comments in teachers' marking, ensuring that students understand exactly how they may improve their work.

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

Yours sincerely

**Martin Cragg**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**