

Serco Inspections
Cedar House
21 William Street
Edgbaston
Birmingham
B15 1LH

Ofsted
T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Serco
Direct T 0121 683 3888

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Mr Graham Roberts
Principal
The Bulwell Academy
Squires Avenue
Bulwell
Nottingham
NG6 8HG

Dear Mr Roberts

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Bulwell Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Clive Kempton HMI to your academy on 24 and 25 May 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.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, senior staff, groups of students and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

The Bulwell Academy opened in September 2009. It is sponsored by Edge, with specialisms in business and enterprise. The academy was due to open in new buildings but building work was behind schedule. The academy therefore opened in the two predecessor school buildings, Henry Mellish and River Leen, and moved into the new building in September 2010. During the first year of operation, Years 7 and 8 were based on the former River Leen site and Years 9, 10, 11 and 12 on the former Henry Mellish site. Student admissions have risen in Year 7 and there are currently 911 students on roll, including 22 in the newly-established sixth form. The academy is growing in size because of its increasing popularity in the community.

Students are divided into five business communities on entry into the academy, with members of the same family belonging to the same business community. The academy has a specialist unit for students with autistic spectrum disorder.

The vast majority of students are of White British heritage. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is very much higher than the national average. The proportion of students registered by the academy as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is above the national figure; however, the proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is lower than that found nationally.

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

Attainment on entry to the academy and its predecessor schools has been very low. Although attainment remains low, there has been notable improvement. The proportion of students obtaining five A* to C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics rose to 36%, an increase of six percentage points from the attainment in the two predecessor schools. Results from early entries to GCSE and the academy's assessment information indicate that current Year 11 students are on track to sustain this improvement. Academy staff have worked hard to raise attainment in subjects such as mathematics through targeted support for individuals and small group intervention. There is careful monitoring of students' progress and clear identification of those students who could benefit from extra support. Increasingly, changes to other courses offered to students in Years 9 and 10 are already raising achievement. For example, BTEC certificate and diploma courses have been introduced. Vocational courses perform strongly. Nearly all students are on track to leave with a qualification in 2011.

In 2010, students did not make the expected progress from low starting points due to a legacy of underachievement. However, high attaining girls and the very small number of Pakistani and African students made at least satisfactory progress. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are not making the progress they should because provision is not meeting their needs sufficiently. In the lessons observed, students made satisfactory progress and are beginning to catch up. They generally settle to work quickly and cooperate well. Progress is accelerating as a result to improvements in teaching and other provision.

The first set of students in the sixth form are completing their courses this year and the vast majority are on track to achieve their challenging targets.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Relationships between adults and students are positive and a significant strength of the academy. Behaviour has improved and is consistently at least satisfactory and, on some occasions, good. Students report that behaviour has improved since the start of the academy. They report that everyone gets along and that they are all

working harder. Behaviour is much better now because there are clear rules used by all staff. It must not be underestimated just how far the academy has moved in this regard. The behaviour expectations of the new academy were a huge change for some students. While fixed-term exclusions have increased, this reflects a raising of the bar and higher expectations of student behaviour. There has been one permanent exclusion this year; an improvement on last year.

Attendance remains a significant issue for the school. It is well below the national average and only marginally improved on the same period last year. Rates of attendance decline as students get older, with the lowest attendance is in Year 11 where 31 students have attendance of less than 80%. The main reason for the very high rates of absence is holidays in term time. On average, 50 students are late each day. The academy fully realises the significance of this issue and two attendance officers make phone calls to parents and carers and undertake home visits. The school's actions are not having enough impact in improving attendance, which remains inadequate.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors observed 23 lessons, of which 21 were jointly observed with senior leaders. There are notable strengths and some examples of good practice. The quality of teaching varies across the academy. The most successful lessons sustain a good pace with a sharp focus that engages all the students and teachers are extremely mindful of students' specific learning needs and abilities. A range of engaging activities capture students' interest and there is often peer- or self-assessment involving the students themselves assessing the progress they are making. Students work independently and take responsibility for their learning. In spite of considerable improvements in teaching, there remain pockets of inadequate teaching and too much teaching that is satisfactory. The most common limitations are in planning, when the intended learning outcomes lack challenge because the teachers' use of assessment does not take full account of students' prior learning. Teachers do most of the work in lessons. Questioning strategies are underdeveloped and often only involve a few students who raise their hands. There is little targeted challenge or pressure on students to extend their answers. The marking of students' work is weak and infrequent and does not give sufficient guidance on what students need to do to improve. Presentation in students' books and folders is often untidy.

The curriculum has been extensively audited and action taken to ensure that it meets the needs of students, especially at Key Stage 4. The three-year Key Stage 4 curriculum allows students an early start to GCSE and vocational courses. This enabled some students to complete courses in Year 10 and start A-level courses in Year 11. The business and enterprise specialism is bringing many benefits to students and is enhancing the curriculum. For example, workshops are run by external businesses on personal finances, there is a career academy programme and an increasing number of partnerships with business working directly with the academy.

The academy provides effective care and guidance and support for students. The pastoral side is a strength. The academy staff work tirelessly to provide an extensive range of outside welfare professionals to support students whose circumstance make them potentially vulnerable. The school meets safeguarding requirements.

Students comment positively about their experience of the sixth form in raising their aspirations; five are going onto higher education a year early. The sixth form curriculum is limited due to its current size but enhanced by partnerships with local colleges. It is broadly vocational with some students doing AS-level courses. Sixth form students are excellent role models with all undertaking extra enrichment activities such as sports leadership awards and helping in local primary schools. Their attendance is good. Student progress is carefully tracked and monitored so all students know how they are doing.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The academy is led effectively by the Principal and senior leaders. They set a clear direction focused on raising students' achievement and improving their personal development. Senior leaders have been successful in bringing two schools together and establishing one community. The school is calm and orderly. Senior staff have clear responsibilities and work together well to implement strategic plans. Systems to monitor and track students' progress have been strengthened very considerably. Senior leaders have made notable improvements in attainment, behaviour and the curriculum. The academy made a slow start with its opening on two sites and this restricted developments in ensuring staff from both schools worked in a consistent manner. Limited progress has been made with attendance and improving outcomes for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The effectiveness of planned actions are not consistently monitored against measurable outcomes or robust success criteria so it is not always clear how successful actions have been. The effectiveness of middle managers is too variable. Their monitoring and evaluation is not systematic enough to pick up issues around the quality of marking in books and improve teaching in their subjects. The academy recognises the need to identify and share the most effective practice more widely to improve teaching further. During the inspection, there was evidence that some coaching is improving teaching.

Senior staff and the governing body have an accurate understanding of the academy's strengths and areas for development. The governing body is well organised, regularly review the academy's progress against key indicators such as attainment, attendance, exclusions and the number of businesses involved in the community. It is very knowledgeable about the academy and is, consequently, in a strong position to provide suitable challenge. The academy has demonstrated that it has satisfactory capacity to sustain and extend the improvements made and to further strengthen the outcomes for students.

External support

The academy has found the support of the School Improvement Partner particularly useful in challenging the school to make the necessary improvements. The academy has used the sponsor, Edge, to broker support from an educational consultancy to initiate a strategic change to the curriculum and provide training for staff on delivering vocational courses.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the progress made by students with special educational needs and/or disabilities by undertaking a more rigorous analysis of the impact of actions and developing a coherent overview of the provision.
- Ensure there are effective strategies in place to reduce the number of students who have low levels of attendance and are persistently absent so attendance is raised to 92% by June 2012.
- Accelerate the progress that all groups of students make by increasing the proportion of good and outstanding lessons, in particular by:
 - ensuring teachers consistently use assessment information to plan challenging learning activities for the full range of student abilities
 - ensuring that teachers' marking is completed to a consistently high standard and is informative in guiding students on how to improve
 - by targeting 70% of teaching to be good or better and 100% to be satisfactory by April 2012.

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

Davinder Dosanjh
Her Majesty's Inspector