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26 May 2011

Principal
Bolton St Catherine's Academy
Newby Road
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Bolton
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Dear Mr Harris

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Bolton St Catherine's Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy with Mark Williams HMI 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 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, nominated staff, four groups of students and two members of the governing body, one of whom is also a representative of the sponsors. Inspectors visited 19 lessons and an assembly, conducted several learning walks and made brief visits to a number of tutorial sessions and the SMART Centre. Two joint observations of lessons were carried out with senior leaders.

Context

The academy caters for students of all abilities in the 3-19 age range. It opened in September 2009 on two sites, both of which had previously housed predecessor schools. It is sponsored by the Manchester Diocese of the Church of England and by David and Anne Crossland. The academy has specialisms in mathematics and business and enterprise. There are 947 students on roll; 247 students are in its primary phase and 638 are enrolled in Years 7 to 11. In September 2010, the academy opened a sixth form and 62 students are currently on roll in Year 12. The academy is due to transfer into a new building in spring 2012 which it will share with a local special school.

January 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Most students at the academy are of White British heritage and a few speak English as an additional language. Over half of the students are known to be eligible for free school meals, which is well above average. More than a third of learners have special educational needs and/or disabilities, a proportion which is above average although a below average proportion have a statement of special educational needs. The proportion of girls at the academy is slightly below that found in other schools. All staff employed by the predecessor schools transferred to the academy. Since it opened, 11 staff have left the academy and 17 have joined it.

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

At the end of the academy's first year, the proportion of students in Year 11 achieving the key measure of five A*-C grades at GCSE level, including English and mathematics, rose substantially to 36%. This figure was more than double that attained in 2009 by its predecessor school and exceeded the government's floor target for this age group. Nonetheless, the figure remains well below average. Contributing to this strong improvement was a greater allocation of time for the core subjects, a good range of revision strategies and an effective mentoring programme. A strong focus was also placed on identifying students who were underachieving in English and mathematics and providing targeted support for them. This trend of improvement has been sustained. Results already accumulated for the current academic year following the early entry of students to mathematics and English GCSE exams are five percentage points higher than those achieved at the same time last year. The proportion of students gaining five good GCSE passes in 2010 was above average and that of students gaining five GCSEs at A*-G level improved. The percentage gaining at least one pass at GCSE or its equivalent rose to 99% in 2009 and again in the current academic year as all students have gained a qualification at this level. At Key Stage 3 in 2010, teachers' assessments showed that 70% of students reached Level 5 in mathematics, the standard expected of 14 year olds. Fifty per cent of students reached this level in English. The most recent assessments by the academy show that results in English at this level for the current academic year have improved strongly. In 2010, there was wide variation in the performance of different subjects at GCSE level. For example, results in English, mathematics and history were significantly below the national average. Results in others, such as drama and biology, were above average. The percentage of students who gained at least two good GCSEs in science rose in 2010 and was well above average. No academic results for the sixth form were available at the time of the monitoring visit.

In the primary phase of the academy, children enter the Early Years Foundation Stage with skills and knowledge that are well below those expected for their age. They make satisfactory progress in their learning. In 2010, results at Key Stage 1, especially in mathematics, improved on those gained by the predecessor primary school but were still well below average. As a result, the academy adapted its curriculum to focus more strongly on phonics and the core subjects. Attainment at Level 4 in Key Stage 2 was well below average. Results in mathematics matched those attained in 2009 but dipped in English. The

academy responded quickly by strengthening staffing and how students were prepared for assessment tests.

In the academy's first year, the overall progress made by students, including those entitled to free school meals, in the secondary phase of the academy was satisfactory. Progress made in English and mathematics was well below average and boys made better progress in these subjects than girls. Most students with special educational needs and/or disabilities made progress that was well below average but some, including those with a statement of special educational needs did better. The overall progress made by pupils and students in lessons observed by inspectors was satisfactory. Stronger progress was made in English lessons than in other subjects.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The attendance of pupils and students rose sharply in the academy's first year and this improvement has been sustained. Key to this has been the rapid and persistent response to absence by the academy's attendance officers. Behaviour has improved and the number of learning days lost to exclusion has reduced substantially. While much good behaviour was observed in lessons, other examples of behaviour were less good, ranging from defiance over mobile phone use to talking while the teacher was speaking. Students throughout the academy demonstrate an understanding of how to stay safe and report that a decrease in bullying and the improvements in behaviour have helped them feel so. They are welcoming and generally interested in their work, although the level of their interest and the standard of their behaviour are often dependent on the quality of the lessons they attend. They show an understanding of how to lead healthy lifestyles but not all put this into practice. Students' understanding of spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues is developing but they are more aware of religious differences than cultural ones. Members of the school council and the 'student voice' are proud of their contribution to the academy. However, students not directly involved in these forums are not always clear about what these groups achieve for them.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching observed during the monitoring visit was satisfactory, and sometimes better, in nearly all lessons. Where learning was good, lessons were characterised by a fast pace, good behaviour management and activities that engaged and retained students' interest. Teachers and additional adults focused on what students were to learn, rather than the tasks they had to complete. Searching questions were asked regularly which made students think through responses for themselves. Where teaching was satisfactory, teachers talked for too long and often concentrated on what students had to do rather than focusing on how well they were learning. Opportunities to challenge students to take the next step in their learning were not always taken and in some lessons behaviour which slowed learning was not quickly and effectively tackled. Teachers' use of assessment information is developing but is inconsistent. The use of data to inform planning and

learning activities is not always evident and the quality of marking is variable. Some marking offers students clear ways to improve their learning but too much does not.

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, there is an appropriate balance of child-initiated and adult-led activities. The adoption of an international curriculum in the primary phase has provided students with opportunities to apply skills learnt in one subject in another. At Key Stage 3, students have opportunities to sit examinations early and thus enjoy the challenge this affords. Those in Key Stage 4 are offered an appropriate range of academic and vocational routes depending on their needs and this is steadily being refined. More-able students have opportunities to study for AS levels and they welcome this. In the sixth form there is a good range of subjects. The academy also provides innovative distance learning opportunities for the study of law and psychology. The academy's specialisms are largely focused on older learners, and some opportunities to embed these skills in the primary phase are missed. Senior leaders have a stronger understanding of the effectiveness of the curriculum and its specialisms on the secondary phase than they do of these in the primary phase.

Students receive a good level of academic support and guidance. The SMART centre, which caters for students whose behaviour drops below the standard expected, has contributed well to the reduction in exclusions and the rise in attendance. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified but there is some inconsistency in how their needs are met, as some do not have clear targets in their individual education plans and additional adults, rather than teachers, are responsible for leading their learning and development.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Under the very clear direction provided by the Principal, the senior leadership team has focused successfully on establishing high expectations for students and staff of what can be achieved and laying the foundations for a positive learning ethos. It has also concentrated relentlessly on raising standards rapidly at Key Stage 4, particularly in English and mathematics. The creation of the sixth form has made significant inroads into the numbers of local young people who are not in education, employment or training. The key priorities of the academy's strategic plan have been well addressed and the academy knows its strengths and where it must improve. Its accurate self-evaluation and the strong improvements in attendance, behaviour and results at Key Stage 4, indicate that the academy has good capacity to improve further.

Factors driving improvement include effective new appointments, beneficial changes to the learning environment in both sites and extra resources for learning, such as laptops and additional staff. The improvement in attendance has been aided by the creation of a separate local base for vulnerable students. The behaviour management policy has reduced exclusions and increased learning time and students appreciate its 'restorative justice' approach. However, this policy is not yet fully embedded or consistently applied in day-to-day classroom teaching. The academy has increased steadily the amount and the



quality of its assessment information across all key stages. Data have been well used to identify underachievement in key year groups and subjects and to enable the academy to revise its initial targets appropriately to make them more challenging. Assessment information has also been used well to increase the accountability of subject departments and staff. The academy is aware that teachers' skills in the use of data, although improved, can be strengthened.

Useful steps have been taken to strengthen middle leadership and the academy has rightly identified this as an area for development. Heads of departments review their subject's effectiveness annually and subsequently draw up action plans. A leadership training programme has been carried out which has been available to all staff. Good opportunities have been created for subject leaders to meet with colleagues from other schools and a system of linking pairs of subject leaders is extending good practice. An external consultant has been well used to work with heads of key departments but this work has not yet been extended to all subject leaders. The quality of teaching is monitored by senior staff and heads of departments through observations of lessons and learning walks. These procedures are not yet consistent or robust enough across the academy to ensure that agreed policies and improvements in teaching are fully embedded and feedback to staff is often informal.

The academy's evaluation of the quality of teaching is accurate and the judgements of senior leaders who jointly observed lessons matched those of inspectors. Major weaknesses in teaching have been tackled. Valuable steps to improve the quality of teaching have been taken, such as enabling staff to visit other settings and creating academy-wide 'teaching and learning communities' where approaches to teaching are discussed. Along with the stronger emphasis on interpreting data, these have encouraged teachers to be more reflective about their practice and increased the level of professional dialogue. However, the understanding of what constitutes good and outstanding teaching is not yet fully embedded.

Good steps have been taken to involve students and parents in the academy's development. The 'student voice' has been strengthened and students are consulted on proposed policies. Students also commented favourably on how some staff were asking them more about what helps them learn. Courses for parents and carers have been held as well as informative meetings about exams and how they can help their children learn. Some of these have been thoughtfully tailored in order to meet students' differing academic needs. Staff have worked hard to strengthen links with parents and carers and parents' evenings are increasingly well attended. The academy has consulted parents, carers and learners and responded to a number of their concerns, such as reducing some class sizes and improving lunchtime facilities.

External support

External consultants have been well used to train staff and to corroborate senior leaders' judgements on the quality of teaching and the academy's progress. The expertise of a local school was aptly drawn upon by the academy when it set up its sixth form and a number of outside providers are used to offer courses beyond the traditional curriculum. Staff have had

good opportunities to visit other settings to observe good and outstanding practice in teaching.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding teaching, by improving marking and assessment, classroom management and the engagement of learners and by focusing on the progress students make in lessons.
- Strengthen the rigour and consistency of monitoring procedures across the academy.
- Develop middle leadership so that middle leaders have greater oversight of the effectiveness of their respective departments.

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

Yours sincerely

Mr Michael McIlroy
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
 the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dczf.gsi.gov.uk]