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Mrs Lorna Caldicott
The Milton Keynes Academy
Fulwoods Drive
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Dear Mrs Caldicott

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Milton Keynes Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 15 June 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 and other leaders and managers, groups of pupils and the Chair of the Governing Body. Inspectors observed 19 lessons.

Context

The Milton Keynes Academy, which specialises in enterprise, opened in new purpose-built facilities in September 2009. The academy is sponsored by Edge, an independent charity. The current Principal has been in post since the academy opened. Approximately two-thirds of teaching staff joined the academy from the predecessor school. However, since then, there have been significant changes to staffing with 39 members of the current teaching staff recruited externally. Changes to the academy's leadership structure since January 2011 have seen the departure of a senior vice principal and the recruitment of two vice principals.

There are currently 1157 students on roll, including 131 in Studio 6, the academy's sixth form. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is much higher than average with the highest group of Black or Black British African heritage. Similarly high is the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language. Higher proportions of students are known to be eligible for free school meals than average. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is broadly average. Student mobility is very low.

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

In 2010, attainment was exceptionally low and only 19% of students secured five or more good passes at GCSE, including in English and mathematics. Attainment was extremely low in a number of subjects, including in both English and mathematics. While students' prior attainment is very low overall, leaders and managers recognise that students did not make fast enough progress to address their previously low achievement. Students did well in securing five good grades or their equivalence in subjects other than in English and mathematics, and achievement against this measure was significantly higher than average.

Attainment for current students, while still very low, is rising rapidly in English but less quickly in mathematics. This is linked sharply to the contrasting quality of teaching between the two subjects and reflects stronger leadership capacity in English than in mathematics, linked to the different leadership and management arrangements for each subject. The academy's estimated judgement regarding the attainment of current Year 11 students coming to the end of their studies is realistic, reflecting students' low starting points and the academy's uneven success in securing sufficiently quick progress. Nevertheless, boys are doing significantly better than last year with higher proportions set to achieve five good grades at GCSE than in 2010.

As with other students, those with special educational need and/or disabilities are making good progress in English but uneven progress in mathematics. The academy's work to address the exceptionally low literacy levels of some students is proving to be increasingly successful in raising achievement. Linked to this, work to improve the language skills of those who speak English as an additional language is having a significant effect in raising their achievement across the curriculum and attainment for these students is significantly better than last year.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance is average for students in Years 7 and 8 and above average in Year 9. However, below average attendance in Year 10 and especially in Year 11 means that although attendance is rising, it remains low overall. The proportion of students who are persistent absentees is too high. This is despite the academy implementing a wide range of strategies to encourage all students to attend regularly, including

recourse to legal action. Staff investigate absenteeism quickly and tenaciously and the academy benefits from good support from the educational welfare officer. While such strategies are having a clear impact in supporting rising attendance in the lower year groups, their impact has not been realised quickly enough for older students.

Behaviour in lessons is usually satisfactory and sometimes good. There is a strong link between student behaviour and the quality of teaching. In most lessons, students conduct themselves well, are respectful and work at an appropriate pace. However, on occasions when learning tasks are poorly conceived, some students become disengaged and spend too much time chatting. Students behave appropriately as they move during lesson changeovers and at lunchtime, although their good conduct during these transition points is still overly dependent on high levels of staff supervision. The proportion of students subject to fixed term exclusions remains high but has reduced as students respond increasingly well to the academy's robust stance on poor behaviour. The academy makes good use of alternative educational provision to promote positive outcomes for students who find it difficult to fully adapt to school life. It is important to note that students reported, consistently, that they feel safe.

The effectiveness of provision

Consistently good teaching in English is having a clear impact on raising achievement across all year groups. In English lessons and other good lessons, teachers use their good knowledge of students' subject-specific strengths and weaknesses to plan learning activities which are explicitly linked to their individual prior attainment. In these lessons, teachers use assessment extremely effectively to ensure that they and their students have a very clear understanding of how well students are doing and what they need to do to improve. Planning meets the needs of all learners well and is highly successful in maximising the impact of additional adults to support learning. Teachers identify, very precisely, the strategies they will use to help students with special educational needs and/or disabilities overcome barriers to learning. However, even in these successful lessons, opportunities are sometimes missed to promote high quality independent and collaborative learning activities to ensure all students are fully involved throughout the lesson. Sometimes teachers underestimate what students can do. While inspectors saw good teaching, no lessons were judged to be outstanding.

In the less effective, though generally satisfactory lessons, the pace of learning is too slow and activities are not challenging enough. In a few lessons, students make only satisfactory progress because the quality of teachers' explanations is not good enough. Modelling of activities is not sufficiently effective in ensuring students know how to make good progress and teachers' use of assessment is not sharp enough to quickly identify students' misconceptions. On occasions, teachers direct too much of the learning through extended class discussion which fails to secure the involvement of the whole group. This also results in students working at the same pace,

regardless of their differing abilities. The quality of teaching in mathematics is satisfactory overall. However, leaders and managers know that satisfactory teaching in mathematics and other subjects will not be enough to raise attainment with sufficient speed, given students' low starting points.

Inspector's agree with the school's judgement that teaching is improving but remains satisfactory overall. The proportion of inadequate lessons has reduced very considerably since the academy opened.

The curriculum is increasingly responsive to students' emerging needs, and provision for vocational education is good. Provision is enhanced significantly through the academy's enterprise specialism. The range of BTEC qualifications available for study has grown and the proportion of students undertaking business-related qualifications is rising rapidly. Students benefit from well-planned provision for work experience and feedback from local employers is extremely positive with regard to their conduct, attendance and punctuality. Students value opportunities to engage with staff from the two local businesses which work within the school's enterprise hub.

Strategies to raise attainment in English, mathematics and science through changes to the curriculum are well-conceived. For example, more curriculum time than before is now devoted to English and mathematics. Less able students no longer pursue English literature in Key Stage 4 so that they can spend more time developing essential literacy skills. Similarly, while leaders and managers have secured good attainment in science through BTEC provision, opportunities are increasing for more able students to pursue more demanding science qualifications, including double and triple science at GCSE.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Leaders and managers have responded quickly and effectively to last year's disappointing examination results. Leadership and management arrangements have been restructured to increase levels of accountability across the school, and to improve the impact of line management and middle leadership. The quality of self-evaluation has improved to be more rigorous and incisive than before. Linked to this, the management of data has improved to be more accurate and realistic so that leaders and managers have a much clearer understanding of how well individuals and groups of students are doing. Systems to monitor and evaluate the impact of interventions designed to raise achievement are proving to be more effective. This means that staff are better able to identify aspects of provision which are working less well so that necessary adjustments can be made quickly. As a result of these changes, the academy's capacity for sustained improvement has been strengthened and is satisfactory.

The academy's development plan is sharply focused on the key priority of raising attainment, particularly in English and mathematics, with clearly defined and

measurable long-term targets and interim milestones. However, within this, improvement planning with regard to provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and for those with low levels of literacy is less robust. Nevertheless, recent changes to the leadership and management structure are already having a clear impact in securing significant improvements to this aspect of provision.

Leaders and managers are rightly focusing on raising attainment within the academy before extending their work to raise standards of attainment in the wider community.

Highly successful strategies to reduce the incidence of inadequate teaching are now being matched by good quality professional development to increase the proportion of good lessons. The academy day has been restructured to provide extensive, weekly, training opportunities and increasingly good use is made of the most effective practitioners so that the best practice can be shared more widely. The capacity of middle leaders to lead their teams is growing rapidly through additional training and opportunities for middle leaders to work with highly qualified external consultants. Opportunities have not yet been fully exploited to share the good practice seen in English with the mathematics department.

Arrangements for the governance of the academy ensure that senior leaders are held to account very robustly. Governance benefits from high levels of educational expertise. The governing body has a very clear understanding of the academy's pressing areas for development and plays a key role in monitoring the effectiveness of leaders and managers in addressing key priorities.

The sixth form

Attainment for the small number of students who pursue A level courses to the end of Year 13 is lower than average but rising, and represents satisfactory achievement overall given students' low starting points. Failure rates at A2 remain too high. Students' achievement at AS level in 2012 was inadequate. Twenty per cent of students dropped out of the sixth form during Year 12 last year. However, much improved systems to ensure students are on the right courses are now ensuring that attainment in Year 12 is rising quickly in most curriculum areas. Attainment remains extremely low at AS level in mathematics, biology and chemistry. Students make good progress on Level 1 and 2 courses, particularly in travel and tourism and BTEC sport. Retention into Year 13 remains low but this is due to students being directed to alternative provision which better meets their needs and abilities following their successful completion of Level 1 and 2 vocational qualifications.

External support

Good quality external support is proving to be increasingly effective in strengthening leadership capacity and improving the quality of provision. Rigorous monitoring of subject departments by a very well-qualified external consultant is having a direct impact in strengthening improvement planning across the curriculum. Leaders and managers also benefit from considerable support from representatives of the academy's sponsor. This, together with the incisive analysis and challenge provided by the school improvement partner, has helped to strengthen the effectiveness of self-evaluation and enhance the skills of senior staff.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Quickly raise attainment in mathematics, and improve the quality of mathematics teaching to ensure that lessons secure consistently good progress, by:
 - improving teachers' subject-specific knowledge so that they have a clearer understanding of the key components which make for effective learning in mathematics
 - improving the quality of marking and feedback in mathematics so that students have a clear understanding of what they need to do to improve, with targets kept under regular review
 - strengthening links between the English and mathematics department so that the good practice seen increasingly in English has a wider impact on students' achievement.
- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding lessons in all subject areas so that students' achievement and attainment accelerates more rapidly, by:
 - building teachers' skills in devising lessons which promote good opportunities for independent and collaborative working
 - ensuring that all lessons provide good pace and challenge for students of all abilities
 - increasing the quality and consistency of marking and assessment.

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

Daniel Burton
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc David Young, Chair of the Governing Body
The Academies Group, DfE [colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk]