

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 L Gilbert
Principal
Francis Combe Academy
Horseshoe Lane
Watford
WD25 7HW

Dear Mr Gilbert

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Francis Combe Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 28 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, groups of pupils, nominated staff, the Chair and Vice-chair of the Governing Body, a representative of the sponsors, West Herts College and its partners the University of Hertfordshire.

Context

The headteacher of the predecessor school led the academy during the first year of operation. However, she left the academy in August 2010 after the first examination results were published. During the autumn term 2010, the Deputy Principal led the academy and the new Principal took up his post in January 2011. A significant restructuring of support staff took place during the early part of the summer term and, similarly, a restructuring of the teaching and leadership staff is underway in readiness for the start of the new academic year.

The academy is larger than the average secondary school and the percentage of students known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national average. The percentage of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is just above the national figure as is the proportion of those who speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students registered by the school as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above the national figure, although the proportion with a statement of special educational need is below the national average. There are a small number of children who are looked after by the local authority. The academy hosts the local authority specialist provision for students with a specific learning difficulty (dyslexia).

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

The outcomes of the 2010 public examinations were disappointing. At 51%, the proportion of students securing five A* to C grades at GCSE was well below average. Similarly, the proportion of students securing five good GCSE passes including English and mathematics, at 31%, remained below the government's targets for secondary schools.

Early results from the examination boards are notably more positive than the previous year. For example, 27% of students had secured a higher grade GCSE in English and mathematics prior to the start of the summer term, a position notably stronger than in previous years. The academy is developing an extensive assessment database supported by standardised tests and GCSE results already secured as part of an early entry programme which points to rising standards across the year groups. For example, 35% of the current Year 9 students have already secured a higher level pass in applied science.

Learning and progress were found to be good or better in 10 of the 24 lessons seen by inspectors. Standards are rising where teachers are addressing the students' weaknesses in subject-based literacy or the misconceptions they have acquired in their prior learning. Learning is strongest where teachers focus the lesson on what the students are expected to learn and use assessment to facilitate learning. For example, in an effective Year 10 physics lesson on time and motion, good planning allowed the teacher to address weaknesses in the students' calculation skills that were the result of previous misconceptions. As the lesson evolved, the teacher effectively developed the students' understanding of variable velocity with a series of well-conceived extension tasks.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

In the lessons observed, most students' attitudes to learning were positive. Students were co-operative and worked well together in pairs and in groups. Most students were keen to contribute when questioned, but in the less effective lessons teachers

relied on students raising their hands to answer rather than targeting specific individuals with questions.

Behaviour was good in lessons, even in those that were less effective. Changes to the management of behaviour by teachers introduced by the new Principal are having a positive impact on learning. Students spoken to on the monitoring visit are largely positive about the approach to behaviour management, although they admit that their behaviour can deteriorate in lessons when their usual teacher is absent.

Managers record and evaluate information on the students' behaviour and on the support and sanctions students are given. Academy data show that the proportion of detentions has reduced significantly since the introduction of the new behaviour management policy because students understand the consequences of any unacceptable behaviour.

Academy data indicates that attendance is currently 92%, in line with the previous year, and 1% below the current national average. Managers recognise that the impact of stricter behaviour boundaries has had a greater impact on boys from White British backgrounds with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Actions to improve the attendance of this particular group are under discussion. Punctuality to lessons is good.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors jointly observed 24 lessons, visiting all with senior managers. Whilst there was a balance between the proportion of lessons judged to be good or satisfactory, one in five lessons seen was inadequate. The most effective lessons were characterised by careful planning which focussed on the needs and interests of students. In these lessons, assessment was used well to help students understand how to improve further. In an effective dance lesson, performing arts students made good progress as they developed their timing and execution skills guided by the teacher's tireless commentary on stage focus and mental concentration.

In many lessons, teachers focus too strongly on the assessment process students are expected to complete, rather than the subject matter students are to learn; in these lessons, students were not clear what they actually had to do. In the less effective lessons, opportunities to develop students' skills, knowledge and vocabulary were missed and activities were not planned with sufficient care to secure the progress of those with differing abilities. In lessons judged to be inadequate, students made insufficient progress as the lessons were poorly planned or executed.

In students' workbooks inspectors saw some very good examples of regular marking with comments that helped students to improve. In one lesson, for example, the teacher summarised improvement points on the front of the students' books, which students appreciate. However, in many instances marking is cursory and not

completed sufficiently regularly. Assessment information although used effectively by the new senior management team, is not yet used well or confidently across all departments.

Changes to the curriculum planned for September 2011 include four pathways where learners are guided to qualification groupings based on English, mathematics and science tests in Year 9. While one pathway enables students to take GCSE subjects, including a language, the other three include vocational options, mostly intermediate level BTEC courses. A small group of students attend vocational courses at foundation level at the sponsor college. The examination options available in these vocational courses are not sufficiently well publicised in the academy's information to parents. Actions to increase the curriculum breadth further are underway in art, media studies and sciences, particularly in the sixth form. However, these are at an early stage. Opportunities for construction, motor vehicle and hospitality and catering qualifications appear to be limited within the present college partnership arrangements. Outcomes from the specialist subjects of English, art and media are improving and the progress the students make in English is close to the national average.

Students are positive about the support they receive and the impact of the academy's new behaviour management and attendance strategies. Students are pleased with the system, which they see as fair. One student spoke for many when he noted, 'Lesson time is not lost to bad behaviour anymore. We can get on and learn.' The students speak well of the pastoral support available and expressed confidence that there was always someone they could speak to when worried.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The Deputy Principal did well when she led the academy on an interim basis during the autumn term 2010. She helped rebuild staff and governing body confidence that the academy could make progress. Since the appointment of a new Principal, in January 2011, the academy has established a strong senior management team. Good strategic decisions have been made to reinvigorate the leadership team and this has embedded ambition and driven improvement.

The leadership team is both hardworking and reflective, demonstrating an increasing ability to bring sharp professional insights to the enhancement of provision and organisation, for example, the effective reorganisation of behaviour management procedures. Self-evaluation is realistic and standards are notably higher than at the equivalent point in the previous academic year. The governing body and sponsors now receive a wealth of information from senior managers, and this transparency of communication has allowed both parties to become appropriately involved with the academy's revitalisation.

Senior staff were invited to join inspectors as part of the extensive programme of joint observation of teaching and learning. The views expressed by senior colleagues during a formal review of this exercise concurred with the judgements given by HMI.

Inspectors were impressed with the implementation of plans for the development of the academy and the impact of senior management actions to improve provision and outcomes; HMI expressed their confidence in the senior team and the academy's capacity to improve.

External support

The senior management were very positive about the role of the School Improvement Partner and of the effective support of consultants provided by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. A National Leader of Education supported the academy during the autumn term 2010, prior to the appointment of the new Principal.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress.

Priorities for further improvement

- Focus teaching on the quality of learning so that the use of assessment becomes a tool to inform teaching and learning.
- Deepen the curriculum offered within major subject areas so that the balance of courses available supports student progress at a variety of levels.

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

David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

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