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Mr D J Davies
Principal
Droylsden Academy
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Dear Mr Davies,

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Droylsden Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Sue Harrison HMI to your academy on 27 and 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 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, senior staff, the curriculum leaders for English and mathematics, groups of students, a mathematics consultant, and the Chair of the Governing Body who is the Principal of Tameside College which is the academy's sponsor.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009 in the buildings of the two single-sex predecessor schools, which are situated about two miles apart. The former boys' school currently houses Years 7 and 8 and the former girls' school Years 9 to 11. New buildings on this latter site are due to be ready for occupation from January 2012. The Principal took up post in April 2009. Most students, staff and senior leaders transferred to the academy from the two predecessor schools. At present, the proportion of staff who hold leadership and management responsibilities is high but this structure reflects the current educational demands of the two sites. The academy is opening a sixth form in September 2011. The academy's specialisms are mathematics and applied technologies.

There are 1114 students on roll. Girls outnumber boys by around 3:2 in Key Stage 4, which is a legacy of the sizes of the predecessor schools. In Key Stage 3, the numbers of boys and girls are similar. Approximately 20% of the students are of minority ethnic heritage and 12%

speak English as an additional language: 35 are the early stages of learning to speak English. The proportion of students identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities has risen sharply this year to 38%, which is double the national average, although relatively few students, 11, have a statement of special educational needs. An above average proportion of students are known to be eligible for free school meals.

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

The profile of students' attainment on joining the academy in Year 7 is a little below average. It is strongest in Year 8. Many students have underdeveloped skills in literacy and oracy. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is rising and is close to average. The academy's most recent data show that around 80% of Year 9 students reached the standard expected for their age in English and mathematics and around 10% fewer in science.

The two predecessor schools had different track records of performance in GCSE and equivalent qualifications, with girls performing more strongly than boys. In 2009, for instance, 54% of the girls attained five or more A* to C grades including GCSE English and mathematics, but only 23% of the boys. These figures combine to give 35% overall. The academy's first set of results in 2010 showed a rise to 46%, with improvements by boys and girls. While this figure remains below the national average, results from examinations already taken and the academy's assessment information indicate that the 2011 target of 52% is well within reach. Students' attainment in English and mathematics is also rising and the gap in performance between boys and girls is narrowing. The academy's success with vocational courses is reflected in the 78% of students gaining at least five A* to C grades in 2010 when all their subjects were taken into account. While all students were awarded at least one qualification, 10% did not gain at least five A* to G grades, which is too many. In part, this stemmed from alternative provision that did not lead to successful accreditation.

The academy's drive to raise attainment is leading to improvements in students' progress from their varied starting points. The academy's data show that most students are making progress that is at least satisfactory and sometimes good, but this is not consistent across subjects and year groups. For instance, students are making better progress in Year 7 than in Year 8. At Key Stage 4 in 2010, the progress of different groups showed some unevenness, with more-able students and some of those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities making less progress than they should. Initiatives to tackle this include a requirement for students who did not meet their target grades following early GCSE entry in English and mathematics to re-sit, aiming for higher grades, and work with a group of students striving to gain at least three A/A* grades. The academy recognises that it has more to do to increase the proportion of students gaining the highest grades. However, all students and all subjects are the focus for maximising achievement, with staff rightly held accountable for their students' performance. A shared determination to build on the improvements and a positive shift in attitudes and aspirations is emerging.

The quality of learning varies. During the inspection it was satisfactory in around half of the lessons, good in most of the rest, and very occasionally inadequate. Where learning was strongest, all students were enthusiastically involved in group, pair or individual work, with

no loss of pace in the different phases of the long lessons. Students made good gains in their knowledge, skills and understanding, showing a readiness to ask and answer questions, discuss their thinking, and help each other. In the satisfactory lessons, learning was often passive. Reasons for this include teachers dominating the talking, a lack of aids to promote independent learning, and tasks that lacked challenge or which students did not access at a deeper level.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance is rising and, at 91.8% for the current academic year, is closer to the national average. Persistent absence has fallen. Of concern, however, is the attendance of students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, which is significantly lower than that of their peers. Behaviour has also improved. Students are generally polite and friendly and show respect for each other, for staff and visitors. In a few lessons, low-level disruptive behaviour impedes students' progress, and there is occasional boisterousness in corridors. Systems to manage behaviour are reviewed regularly and action taken to increase their effectiveness, for example, the academy has plans to improve its provision for students who are at risk of fixed-term exclusion. The number of these students is decreasing but remains too high.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors observed 15 lessons and, with senior leaders, made shorter visits to a further 10. The academy's view that around two thirds of the teaching is at least good is slightly generous. While the best practice focuses clearly on learning throughout the lessons and makes good use of time, not enough of the teaching is securing students' consistently good progress and enthusiasm for the subject.

Strengths of the good teaching include interesting, meaningful activities that capture and hold students' interest. Skilful questioning prompts and extends students' responses. These teachers anticipate misconceptions and enable students to learn from mistakes and each other through carefully designed examples or activities. They circulate while students work to check understanding and pick-up on errors, using mini plenaries to make teaching points. They use interactive whiteboards and visualisers well to support learning.

Relationships are generally positive. Teachers follow the academy's guidance on sharing the lesson outcomes with students and revisiting them periodically during the lesson. While the 'must, should and could' structure to these outcomes may help to structure and sequence learning, they do not ensure that activities are well matched to students' different starting points, needs and potential, or secure sufficient depth and breadth of learning for all students. Few examples of modified tasks or materials were seen. Generally, all the students in a class tackle the same work. Lesson planning details what students will do in each phase of the lesson, but is less clear on what they will learn. Other weaknesses in the teaching include the use of time and missed opportunities to develop students' speaking skills. By dominating the talking, taking answers from a minority without drawing others into

discussion, or accepting low-level responses without follow-up questions, teachers are not developing students' reasoning skills and articulation of their ideas.

The use of assessment to support learning has been a priority for improvement for the academy with evidence of the impact seen in lessons. Senior staff recognise the need for further development. Teachers place considerable attention on the lesson objectives and students knowing their levels or grades and the next steps. This sits alongside the drive for good performance in assessments and examinations. Data is not used effectively to support planning for students' differing needs in lessons. The quality of marking varies widely with the best pointing the way forward, although teachers' written questions and comments, intended to support or challenge, are not consistently followed up by students. Self- and peer-assessment are in the early stages. Some is superficial but good examples were observed in the use of GCSE criteria and mark schemes.

The curriculum has developed well to meet students' needs, especially at Key Stage 4. Students benefit from a wide range of academic and vocational options and qualifications. This is enhanced through partnerships with Tameside College and other providers. Students enjoy a wide range of educational visits and other activities, which contribute well to their personal development, as well as to raising attainment. Older students comment on how this has improved since the opening of the academy. Alternative provision has improved this year for students who are unable or unwilling to attend mainstream classes.

In Years 7 and 8, the academy has introduced a project-based approach to some aspects of the curriculum. In Year 7, this focuses on developing literacy skills in particular. The academy's data show this as having a positive impact on students' achievement. In Year 8, project work focuses on humanities subjects. Project work is generally popular with students but the level of work does not challenge all of them sufficiently to achieve their full potential. A further initiative in Years 7 and 8 is the teaching of science and mathematics to mixed-age sets with the aim of placing no ceiling on students' attainment. The academy's data on students' progress paints a mixed picture of the success of this initiative so far.

The substantial increase in the proportion of students identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities has not been accompanied by high quality advice for teachers to aid lesson planning to take appropriate account of students' different needs. For example, the same resources are often used for the whole class despite a wide range of reading ages. A significant proportion of students with additional needs in 2009/10 did not make sufficient progress given their starting points in Year 7. Changes to the curriculum have taken place to address this and the academy's data indicate these are starting to have a positive effect on students' progress. However, attendance remains poor for some of these students. Senior staff recognise the need to improve the accuracy of systems for identifying students' additional needs and tracking their progress, as well as ensuring that provision fully meets their needs.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The Principal's leadership is outstanding, and described as inspirational by many staff. He is passionate about students' learning and growing their aspirations. His clear direction and vision has united students and staff in the drive to raise attainment by setting high expectations and establishing a 'no excuses' culture. He is supported whole-heartedly by the vice-principal and two seconded vice-principals: a strong team spirit underpins their determination to succeed. A testimony to the Principal's leadership is that what was established in the first four terms of the academy was taken forward effectively by the executive team in his absence due to illness.

The Principal has overseen the establishment of the one academy, albeit still on two sites, bringing together two schools which had very different cultures, past records, systems and structures: this is a considerable achievement. There remains much to do as the academy approaches full integration in the new building in January 2012. In particular, a slimmer structure for leadership and management at all levels will be required next year. The Principal has rightly identified the need to ensure effective leadership of priority areas for development in the interim period. Management systems, policies and practices developed to date give staff the professional freedom to do 'what they do best' within a culture of accountability that seeks to bring improvement and tackles underperformance robustly. Line management is clear and supported by regular meetings. While monitoring has become an established part of day-to-day practice, there is variability in the levels of insight with which leaders at senior and middle levels interrogate the findings. Not all see beyond the completion of actions or implementation of initiatives to the evaluation of their impact to gain information so important in driving forward and securing the next steps towards coherent improvement.

The effectiveness of middle leadership is developing well. Staff benefit from various leadership programmes. Curriculum leaders understand their role and some show promising insight, for instance in the strategic use of analysis of students' performance. At its best this is used to show not only where intervention is needed to close gaps in students' knowledge and skills, but also to review how the topic might be best taught, taking opportunities to share good practice.

The Principal has an accurate picture of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. Development planning has focused appropriately on key priorities and demonstrates positive impact. Progress is reviewed regularly. There is scope to sharpen the quality of development planning by ensuring better correlation between actions, expected impact including measurable success criteria, and arrangements for monitoring and evaluation, considering implications for professional development for staff at the same time.

Work to improve the quality of teaching and use of assessment has met with some success for individual staff and at a whole-academy level. For example, enjoyable 'focus weeks' have concentrated on developing students' wider skills. Staff are aware of the need to promote students' literacy skills but this is not yet consistently effective. Staff select from various training workshops but the academy lacks a systematic programme for improving the quality

of teaching of all staff, drawing on existing good practice, for instance in developing questioning and talk in the classroom. Monitoring of teaching sensibly combines evidence from a range of sources including lesson observations, work scrutiny, accuracy of teachers' grade predictions, and progress of their classes. The academy has developed a useful grid to aid the recording of evidence from lesson observations but the sections on teachers' subject knowledge and assessment for learning are too narrow and, therefore, give too little emphasis on the importance of these in promoting the best learning.

The use of assessment data includes effective tracking of students' progress and analysis of the performance of groups of students, each of which feed into subsequent actions to bring improvement. The use of data is less effective in lesson planning.

The governing body is small but comprises a good mix of professional expertise. The Chair's ambitions for the students and the local community chime with those of the Principal. Members of the governing body have a clear understanding of their role, providing timely and effective support on a number of fronts as well as a suitable level of challenge. They receive good quality information from the academy.

Arrangements are well organised for the opening of the new sixth form in September 2011. The academy's sponsor, Tameside College, has played a pivotal role in this. Staff who will teach advanced courses have observed classes at the college and have participated in training on assessing students' work at an appropriate level. Appropriate plans are in place for the small cohort of students in the first year of the sixth form to join students from a neighbouring college for enrichment activities.

External support

The academy receives good support from the sponsor on various fronts, but particularly for the senior leadership team during the last six months. A mathematics consultant has given good support to the mathematics department and in developing its leadership. She has also supported whole-academy work on curriculum planning in eight-week blocks. Curriculum leaders spoke positively of these developments. The academy benefits from support from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and the School Improvement Partner.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise the quality of teaching with the aim of making learning more vibrant, by:
    - adopting a systematic whole-academy approach to developing key aspects of the teaching, making the most of existing good practice
    - ensuring sufficient challenge and depth of learning
    - promoting students' oracy and reasoning skills
    - helping students to develop their independent learning skills.

■ Improve provision for students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities by ensuring:

 — systems for the identification of students' needs and the tracking and review of their progress are effective

 — teachers receive appropriate guidance to support planning for meeting students' individual needs.

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,

Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

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