

Tribal
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol BS2 8RR

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

Direct T 0117 3115319
Direct F 0117 3150430
Direct email: matthew.parker@tribalgroup.com

16 September 2011

Mr Andrew Reese
Principal
Bishop of Rochester Academy
Magpie Hall Road
Chatham
ME4 5JB

Dear Mr Reese

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Bishop of Rochester Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Jane Wotherspoon HMI to your academy on 13 and 14 September 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 leaders, middle managers and teachers, groups of students, parents, the Chair of the Governing Body and two representatives of the sponsors.

Context

The Bishop of Rochester Academy is a mixed secondary school of average size. The academy is a result of a merger between two local schools in September 2010. It is sponsored by the Church of England, Canterbury Christ Church University and Medway Council. The academy is situated in a selective authority where the highest attaining 31% of students attend grammar schools. There were 65 students in the sixth form in 2010-11 with 37 recruited for 2011-12. The academy operates on two sites with Years 9, 10 and 11 on the East site and Years 7, 8 and the sixth form, on the West site. Building work for the new academy is starting on the East Campus site during 2011 and is due for completion in 2013.

The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is more than twice the national average, although the percentage with statements of special educational needs is average. Half of these students have behavioural, emotional and social difficulties and the rest have been diagnosed with a range of speech, learning and communication needs, including some with autistic spectrum disorders. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is high, as is the number of students who are identified as at the early stages of learning English as an additional language. The prior attainment of students on entry to the academy is significantly below the national average.

The previous Principal left the academy in March 2011. A new interim Executive Principal has been in place since April 2011, pending a permanent appointment. When the two schools merged, the majority of staff transferred to the academy. Significant staffing issues, including vacancies and long-term absences, resulted in a high level of temporary staff cover during the last academic year. Although the academy is now fully staffed, some appointments are very recent and some departments are being led by staff in an acting capacity.

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

In 2011, 16% of students in Year 11 achieved five or more GCSE grades at A* to C that included English and mathematics, significantly below the national average and the government's floor target. During 2010-2011, strategies to raise students' achievements failed for a number of reasons, including low morale among staff and students and the non-attendance of students at additional subject support sessions. In the current year, the academy has set appropriate targets. All students are expected to achieve two levels of progress across a key stage. However, this is unrealistic as it is not reinforced by sufficiently well-monitored interventions and academic support to help students tackle the legacy of underachievement. In addition, lesson planning and learning objectives do not take account of students' different starting points.

Consequently, the progress of the majority of students across all year groups is well below expectations and is inadequate. According to the academy's data, only a low number of students are currently on track to attain their targets this academic year. At the end of the last academic year, the proportion of Key Stage 3 students making the expected rate of progress in English and mathematics was less than half the national average. Students who have statements of special educational needs or have emotional, social and behavioural difficulties make inadequate progress. Those who are at early stages of learning English as an additional language do not make the accelerated progress of which they are capable.

In lessons inspectors observed a significant number of students, especially, but not exclusively in the lower sets, who did not have the skills they needed to satisfactorily complete the tasks set. For some students, learning is superficial and they are unable to transfer what they have learnt to other relevant contexts when required to do so. A significant number of older students with reading ages well below their chronological ages display poor literacy skills and this hampers their progress in acquiring new concepts and a deep understanding of the work. Many lack confidence and effective oracy, writing and reading skills, especially, in relation to spelling, punctuation and presentation of work. The academy has not effectively tackled the improvements needed in these areas. Consequently, students are unable to express their thoughts or to articulate what they have learnt. In too many lessons, teachers do not share key words with students and marking in books does not highlight the importance of correct grammar and spelling.

This term a promising start has been made on a literacy strategy, including encouraging students to use the Learning Resource Centre, an accelerated readers' scheme, Scrabble and book clubs. All Year 7 students have been tested for reading and spelling levels this term and those identified with low reading ages are receiving small group literacy support. In mathematics, teachers have begun to highlight literacy development points in students' books. However, these initiatives are not all firmly embedded across the curriculum and have not had sufficient time to demonstrate the desired impact.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The academy has placed emphasis on implementing a range of safeguarding and behaviour management strategies, including the close monitoring of students during lesson changeovers, an increased presence of staff and pastoral support assistants around the school and the opening of a hub where students can go for help at any time. As a consequence, students' behaviour is much improved outside of lessons and around the school site. Students and parents reported to inspectors that since the arrival of the interim Executive Principal, they now feel much safer in school. Exclusion rates for the previous academic year were significantly high. Figures were disproportionately high for certain groups of students, including those categorised as having some form of learning difficulty or language need. A large number of students were excluded on a fixed-term basis for serious incidents of verbal or physical violence against staff and other students. The majority of these offences took place in lessons.

Since April 2011, the academy has established an internal exclusions unit along with procedures that permit the withdrawal of students from lessons if they display challenging or confrontational behaviours. The academy's own analysis of poor behaviours has concluded that nearly one tenth of lessons are significantly disrupted by these. However, procedures are not effective as they are not fully understood by all staff and are, therefore, not consistently applied. Numbers of internal exclusions

remain high. The academy does not have a strategy for improving students' behaviour for learning that would support staff in tackling low-level disruption in lessons. In the vast majority of lessons observed by inspectors, a significant minority of students persisted in off-task chatter and, in most cases, disrupted the learning of others. This was especially noticeable when the learning activity was either too difficult or insufficiently challenging.

The academy is in the process of establishing an ethos statement that would reflect its faith denomination. In relation to this, sponsors and governors are aware that students can greatly benefit from a better understanding of moral and spiritual values, and additionally, learn mutual respect and individual responsibility for social behaviour. The 'Love to Learn' vocational centre has successfully engaged disaffected Year 10 and 11 students with behavioural issues and helped them to achieve a BTEC qualification in construction. Vulnerable students are well supported through strong links with support groups in the community, including on site referral to counselling and listening sessions.

Attendance, although significantly below national averages, has improved since April 2011. Persistent absence continues to be very high. A number of strategies, including the issue of fixed penalty notices, are now in place, to improve attendance further. An attendance officer and pastoral support officers have been appointed to liaise closely with parents and students. At present, the academy has not sufficiently analysed the causes of high levels of absence and has not reviewed the effectiveness of the strategies in place.

The effectiveness of provision

Although there is now greater consistency in the way planning for lessons is structured, too often, in practice teaching does not meet the needs of all students in the class, in particular, higher attaining students, those who find learning difficult, and those with language and literacy needs. In addition, support staff are not involved closely enough in the planning of in-class support and do not always effectively help individuals and groups of students develop independent learning strategies. The academy's special needs department can point to some cases of individual students who have been well supported to achieve success, sometimes through a personalised curriculum, that meets their needs. However, there is no systematic approach to ensuring that teachers know how to support the many students in their lessons that need modified tasks or different approaches to enable them to succeed. Support for students at the early stages of learning English as an additional language is well focused in the withdrawal group. However, teachers make few concessions to their level of language and comprehension in mainstream lessons, with too little focus on learning key vocabulary.

The quality of teaching is inadequate largely because teachers do not know their students' ability levels well enough and therefore, do not plan tasks and activities in

line with their needs. The process of assessing students with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties is confused and does not provide teachers with helpful information on specific barriers to learning for each student. As a result of this process, too many students with poor behaviours are wrongly categorised as having learning difficulties. A number of students have learning difficulties that are undiagnosed. Consequently, they misbehave largely because they are frustrated at not being supported to complete a task that is too difficult for them. Owing to insufficient or inaccurate data on their students, teachers' lesson plans do not contain differentiated learning objectives or activities that would help students meet their targets. This includes students who are of higher ability and require more challenge in their work. Therefore, the pace of teaching and staging of activities are often pitched inappropriately. In a number of lessons, teachers neither listen nor question students sufficiently well, and therefore are not able to reshape tasks and expectations and improve students' learning and progress. Too little use is made of assessment activities that can inform teachers of the progress that individual students are making.

In some lessons, too much teacher talk coupled with teacher/student question and answer activities, limit opportunities for students to engage meaningfully in paired and group work. Where these opportunities do occur however, they are not always successful because students have insufficient time to reflect and consolidate their learning. In the minority of lessons where students make good progress, relevant activities that relate to students' ability levels engage and motivate students and they are given opportunities to evaluate their own learning.

In general, students do not receive sufficient feedback to enable them to know or understand the next steps required to attain their targets and so that they can progress to higher levels. They report that the quality of feedback they receive on their written work has improved slightly this term. However, there is little evidence in students' work books of rigorous marking across subjects. This term, an updated marking policy has been put in place that includes the use of stickers and cards as rewards, but there is insufficient monitoring of this across all subjects to ensure consistent implementation.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Since the arrival of the interim Executive Principal, staff morale has improved significantly and there is a shared sense of purpose and commitment evident in all managers and teachers. The interim Executive Principal has demonstrated strong leadership and an acute understanding of what needs to be done to address the fundamental weaknesses in the academy. He is highly regarded by staff, students, parents and carers has made an excellent start in establishing actions that focus on raising achievement, improving the quality of teaching and the management of behaviour around the school. In the main, the self-evaluation is an honest and rigorous appraisal of the weaknesses and progress to date in the academy. The

medium term plans that stem from this are clear and unambiguous in the actions proposed to embed improvements, leading to better outcomes for students.

However, with some exceptions, he is not effectively supported by his senior leaders as the current organisational structures are too complex and not suited to the present needs of the academy. Managers are not cognisant of their responsibilities and therefore, do not act effectively on these. There is a lack of clarity in relation to responsibility for all aspects of a student's academic and pastoral development. The academy has yet to develop greater capacity in its senior and middle leaders so that they are able to undertake more rigorous monitoring of teaching, and to lead teachers in establishing an ethos in which behaviour supports learning in the classroom.

Senior leaders have not instituted systems that are effective for tracking and monitoring students' performance data and progress and subsequently, tackling the significant underachievement that exists. Moreover, the distinctly separate needs of students who are at the early stages of learning English as an additional language and those who are advanced bilingual speakers are not effectively identified. Consequently, teachers are unable to meet their needs and to provide them with appropriate targets in lessons.

The lead manager for improving teaching and establishing a strategy to improve literacy across the curriculum has made a good start in providing staff with professional development. Monitoring of teachers, especially of those who are unable to establish good behaviour in lessons, is in place but middle managers do not consistently or rigorously implement the programme. Some sharing across the curriculum of good practice in teaching is underway, but the practice is not well established. Staff report on the helpfulness of professional development on teaching methodologies. Nevertheless, professional development workshops have not taken enough account of the urgent need to implement effective approaches to assessment and behaviour for learning in the classroom.

The governing body and the sponsors are highly supportive of the academy and the work of the acting Executive Principal and are providing a strong steer on the priorities that need urgent attention.

External support

The School Improvement Partner has overall provided a clear and rigorous appraisal of the academy's current position. This has ensured the academy has clear priorities for improvement. However, the academy's own evaluation of the quality of teaching is too generous and has not taken into account the absence of effective assessment procedures and the impact of low level disruptive behaviours on students' learning and progress.

Main Judgements

Although in recent months the academy has made notable strides, its exceptionally slow progress over the first year has raised serious concerns about the standard of education provided and I am recommending a further monitoring inspection.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards of achievement by accurately identifying and assessing students' needs, through rigorous monitoring and tracking of learning and progress, as well as providing effective pastoral and academic interventions.
- Ensure that teachers' use of data on students' performance, together with assessment activities in lessons, informs them accurately of each student's progress, so that they are able to shape activities and tasks in line with students' abilities and needs.
- Establish a positive ethos for learning by implementing effective behaviour management strategies that minimise disruptions to learning and significantly reduce internal exclusions from lessons.
- Review the roles and responsibilities of the senior leadership team to ensure that there are clear systems and structures to address effectively the academy's current areas of weaknesses.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education Colin Diamond. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Meena Wood
Her Majesty's Inspector