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Mr Matthew Slater
The Principal
Drapers' Academy
Settle Road
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Dear Mr Slater

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Drapers' Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Adrian Lyons HMI to your academy on 21 and 22 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 the principal, senior and middle leaders, teachers, groups of pupils, the Chair of the Governing Body, and the director of an external consultancy firm advising the academy.

Context

The principal led the academy through its initial stages of development and has been in charge since its opening just over a year ago. The acting headteacher of the predecessor school is one of two vice-principals, but all other senior leaders are new academy appointments. Staff turnover has been high. A considerable number of teachers did not transfer into the academy from the predecessor school. Initial recruitment difficulties led to a significant minority of teaching posts being filled by temporary appointments of overseas-trained teachers during the last academic year.

These have gradually been replaced by permanent staff, and the academy has begun to experience a considerable increase in the numbers of well-qualified applicants for vacancies. The academy still operates from the buildings of its predecessor school, but a major new building programme is underway and scheduled for completion by the start of the next academic year. The academy plans to open its sixth form at the same time.

There are currently 482 pupils on roll, a slight decline from the number on roll at the predecessor school. However, enrolment of pupils into Year 7 increased by over a fifth in September 2011 against the corresponding enrolment a year ago. Most pupils are White British, although the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is above that found in most secondary schools. A high proportion of pupils, over a third, have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and the proportion with statements of special educational needs is broadly average. A high proportion of pupils are known to be eligible for free school meals. Mobility into and out of the school at other than the usual times of admission and departure is high.

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

Pupils' GCSE attainment in 2011 was lower than that in the last year of the predecessor school. Nonetheless, results exceeded the national floor standards, and represented good overall progress for many pupils given their generally low attainment on joining the academy. There were, however, significant variations in attainment and progress between subjects and between groups of pupils. Attainment and progress in the academy's specialist subjects of science and mathematics were relative strengths, but progress of pupils in English fell below expectation. Results in Spanish were low. Girls, pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities at the level of school action, pupils who joined the school late and those who speak English as an additional language, achieved relatively well. Boys, the few pupils with special educational needs at the level of school action plus, and those pupils entitled to free school meals, attained relatively low results. It is crucial that the academy closes such gaps in performance and secures consistently good achievement for all groups of pupils.

Currently pupils are learning well. In the large majority of lessons pupils show much interest and approach tasks with consideration and determination. They collaborate positively in developing ideas and evaluating each others' work. Their learning, and their confidence to contribute their thoughts and opinions in large groups, are much constrained by weak literacy skills. The academy is rightly focused on rapidly improving these skills, for example through very well designed literacy starters at the beginning of each lesson. Pupils are also successfully encouraged to overcome their lack of confident self-expression through the wide opportunities they are given to perform. In an outstanding Year 9 drama lesson, for example, every pupil greatly enjoyed giving a physical interpretation of words and characters.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The academy has driven significant improvements in pupils' attendance and punctuality. Attendance was broadly average for the last full academic year, and has been high across all years during the first weeks of the new term. The proportion of persistent absentees reduced markedly, from 6.8% to 4.8%, during the last year and is now in line with the national average. This has been achieved through a mixture of education about the importance of regular attendance, work with external agencies including the use of legal sanctions, and rewards. One pupil explained that pupils now want to attend school because there are a lot of things to attract them, such as the increased range of clubs and out of lesson activities. The overwhelming majority of pupils arrive before the start of the school day and the strong emphasis on punctuality to lessons results in brisk starts and maximises learning time.

Pupils' behaviour is positive and constructive in lessons. The academy site and corridors are calm. Expectations for pupils' behaviour are high in a well-ordered environment. Pupils themselves comment that behaviour is much improved and that they feel safe in the academy. Exclusion rates are very low. The academy has established an inclusion unit as a successful alternative to exclusion. The majority of pupils who were sent to the unit during the last year have not re-offended and returned, and are fully reintegrated into academy life.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching is good in the large majority of lessons. Teachers manage their classes well and many establish an urgent pace in their lessons to sustain pupils' interests. Relationships between teachers and pupils are good, and most teachers are conscious of the need to engage pupils across the ability range in discussion through well-judged and well-targeted questions. Teachers regularly check pupils' progress in class. They encourage pupils to evaluate their own work and that of others against clear success criteria to help pupils understand where they need to improve. The quality and helpfulness of teachers' marking, however, varies widely, and is not always precise about the standards of pupils' work and how it could be improved. While teachers have a good understanding of the varying needs and abilities of pupils in their classes, often they do not adapt tasks to match the level of challenge to pupils' different capabilities. Some pupils therefore find tasks too easy, whilst on occasions work is too challenging for some. An increasingly useful flow of data on the progress of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is, however, supporting their progress through specific interventions and curriculum adaptations.

Teachers across subjects have responded very positively to the academy's drive to raise literacy and numeracy standards. Every lesson begins with very effective literacy or numeracy starter activities, which in most cases link seamlessly into the main content of the lesson. This reinforces the importance of these skills in

underpinning pupils' success in all subjects. Increased curriculum time has been given to English and mathematics, and interventions to support the GCSE attainment of Year 11 pupils in these core subjects have been given an appropriately high priority as a means of lifting attainment. The academy has maintained sound curriculum breadth beyond the core subjects, although opportunities for pupils to learn about, or experience, the world of work are limited. The science specialism has made a positive contribution to improving standards in science and mathematics, and in raising aspirations of higher-attaining pupils to pursue triple science options with a view to future A-level studies in an academy sixth form.

The academy has established comprehensive systems for the care, guidance and support of pupils. It monitors pupils' personal development and well-being closely through its 'commitment ladder' and works effectively with a range of agencies to support pupils' welfare. Engagement with families, for example through the 'strengthening families programme', has supported significant improvements in pupils' attendance and behaviour. Pupils with English as an additional language receive effective mentoring support, and their attainment is above the academy average.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The principal has energetically promoted the academy's goals of raising expectations for pupils' conduct and heightening aspirations for academic success within the academy and local community. The academy's aims and values are now widely shared. A cohesive senior team has guided the academy through considerable staffing turbulence, and the teaching staff are now largely permanent, well-qualified, and delivering mainly good or better lessons. This reflects positively on the academy's capacity for future improvement. The leadership and management of teaching have been effective in improving provision. Information gained from regular lesson observations and focused learning walks is well used by leaders to develop their understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses and to identify where provision needs to improve. Systems for using data on pupils' progress to evaluate the performance of subjects and groups of pupils are, however, underdeveloped, and a senior leader has been newly appointed to take charge of improvement in this area. Leadership structures are clearly defined and lines of accountability identified, but accountability at all levels would be sharpened by more rigorous and systematic use of performance data.

Academy development planning clearly articulates the academy's long-term vision but lacks clear enough milestones and success criteria to allow leaders and managers to sharply account for the academy's performance over time. The governing body has a good range of skills and experience and has been thorough in ensuring that legal requirements are fully met. It has played a key role in developing the academy's vision and has been determined to ensure that plans for the new building stay on track. Financial information is exceptionally clearly presented to facilitate the academy's very effective management of resources.

External support

The academy's development has benefited from incisive termly evaluation reports from its School Improvement Partner, which have positively noted the academy's strengths while clearly identifying key areas for improvement. Leaders have judiciously engaged external consultants to provide advice, support and guidance in a number of priority areas. This has helped secure improvements, for example in the overall quality of teaching and in the work of individual subjects. Relationships between the academy and the local authority are positive, and they have worked in very effective local partnership, for example to improve engagement with vulnerable families and reduce persistent absence.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the use of data on pupils' progress across the academy to more precisely identify the academy's strengths and weaknesses.
- Strengthen academy improvement planning to establish clear milestones and more measurable success criteria.
- Ensure that teachers make effective use of assessment information to adapt activities so that they are well matched to the varying capabilities of pupils in their classes.

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. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Ian Hodgkinson
Her Majesty's Inspector

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