

Friday 30 September 2011

Mr B Fishwick
Principal
Manchester Creative and Media Academy for Girls
Brookside Road
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Dear Mr Fishwick

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Manchester Creative and Media Academy for Girls

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on Wednesday 28 and Thursday 29 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 visit was a second monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Executive Principal, the Principal, senior staff, the learning leads for English, mathematics and science, a group of students, two governors who are also representatives of the sponsors, a parent governor, and two teachers in the early stages of their teaching careers. Of the 26 lessons observed, three were conducted jointly with senior managers, and inspectors made five briefer visits to the 'Opening Minds' competency-based curriculum lessons in Years 7 and 8.

Context

The academy, which is federated with the Manchester Creative and Media Academy for Boys, is due to move into shared new buildings on the site of the boys' academy in September 2012. Both academies experienced a considerable decrease in staffing during the last academic year: 31 teachers and 33 non-teaching staff left the girls' academy. Three teachers joined in September 2011. The number of Year 7 students starting at the academy, 104, was lower than in 2010. Currently, 916 girls aged 11 to 16 years are on roll and one girl is in the second year of the academies' joint sixth form, along with seven boys. The academy decided not to recruit any sixth-form students this autumn. Approximately 45% of students are of minority ethnic heritage. About 16% speak English as an additional language and a few are at the early stages of learning to speak English. Around 26% of students have

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special educational needs and/or disabilities, which is higher than average. Of these students, nine have a statement of special educational needs. The academy serves a community that experiences some disadvantage; 34% of the students are known to be eligible for free school meals, which is double the national average.

Following the first monitoring visit in December 2010, the Executive Principal and governing body decided to bring forward plans for a new leadership and staffing structure. From June 2011, the Principal of the boys' academy became Principal of both academies. She and the Executive Principal are supported by a team of four Vice-Principals whose responsibilities also now span both academies. The impact of these and other leadership changes are discussed within the leadership and management section of this letter.

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

The profile of students' attainment on entry to the academy shows a slight upward trend. It is higher in Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 4, but below average overall with fewer students than is typical having reached the higher Level 5 in national tests at the end of primary school. Weaknesses in many students' speaking, writing and reasoning skills were more evident during this visit, particularly in some of the better lessons. The students lacked the technical vocabulary and ability to express their reasoning when teachers challenged them, rightly, to discuss their ideas and to articulate their thinking. The academy does not have a coherent approach to improving students' communication skills and their higher-order thinking skills.

Attainment during, and at the end of Key Stage 3, is below average overall and represents inadequate progress from students' varied starting points, particularly for the most able. Scrutiny of a sample of students' work across all subjects, including 'Opening Minds', showed variability in the accuracy of teachers' assessments in this key stage. Examples of incomplete, fragmented and inaccurate work were graded too highly while other work was thoughtfully assessed and showed better progression. The work scrutinised also reflected inconsistency in teachers' expectations of the quality, quantity and presentation of students' work and raises significant concerns about students' progress over time. The academy's own data and analysis of students' progress similarly points to too many students making too little progress.

Teacher assessments at Key Stage 3 in 2011 showed students' attainment remained steady in mathematics and an improvement in English and science in the proportions reaching the expected Level 5, albeit it from the cohort's stronger starting points. However, only a third of students reached the higher Levels 6 or 7 in each subject and the proportion being equally successful in reaching at least Level 5 in both English and mathematics fell. Early analyses of students' progress show it to be inadequate overall.

Attainment at Key Stage 4 in 2011 was similar to 2010 with a slight fall to 75% of students gaining five or more A* to C grades at GCSE and equivalent qualifications. Despite the adoption of a range of strategies, including intervention, mentoring, and regular monitoring

of the progress of individual students on the grade C/D borderline, the proportion of students who included GCSE English and mathematics in their A* to C passes remained at 38%, and again fell short of the academy's target. Attainment in different subjects varies widely. Students were most successful in gaining vocational qualifications, particularly in the performing arts. The proportions gaining GCSE A* to C grades rose in English and mathematics but fell in science and modern foreign languages. The achievement of the most able students remains an issue for the academy: too many do not reach the highest grades. The proportion of students achieving five A* to G passes improved slightly to 93% but seven students gained no qualifications, which proportionately is more than in 2010. The academy has been slow to probe why strategies to support these particular students were unsuccessful. Moreover, the governing body did not challenge the initial figures which suggested 10 students had gained no qualifications. Attainment on most of the key measures remains significantly below average, particularly when compared with the performance of girls nationally.

The quality of learning was satisfactory in most lessons. Students are generally cooperative and many want to do well, although they often lack confidence and have weak communication skills. Currently, only the most skilful and vibrant teaching overcomes these factors to secure good gains in students' knowledge, skills and understanding. Too often, better progress and learning are hampered by activities that are undemanding and which take insufficient account of students' individual needs or abilities. In parts of several lessons, learning stood still while students spent time cutting, pasting, colouring and labelling simple diagrams.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Behaviour was good in around half of the lessons. Students are generally cooperative and respond positively to well-pitched challenge in their learning. Few instances of inappropriate behaviour and attitudes to learning were observed. Students speak of enjoying practical, active lessons such as in the performing arts. They are generally polite and most move sensibly around the academy, although not always with a sense of purpose when moving to the next lesson. Overall, punctuality at the start of the day and to lessons has improved. Attendance rose to 90% for the academic year 2010/11 but remains an impediment to higher achievement, as the academy has rightly identified. The proportion of persistent absentees decreased last year but is still too high.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching was good or outstanding in approximately one quarter of the lessons and satisfactory in almost all of the rest. This profile broadly aligns with the view of senior leaders: this improved evaluation of the quality of teaching represents a significant advance from the position last December. Moreover, senior leaders' judgements on the lessons observed jointly with inspectors were accurate and focused well upon the quality of learning. Nevertheless, it remains the case that not enough of the teaching is good or outstanding

and there is too much inconsistency. In this respect, inadequate progress has been made on the area for improvement set at the last monitoring visit.

Many of the weaker elements of the satisfactory teaching reported at the last visit remain. These include a lack of challenge for the most able students and insufficient attention to modifying activities for the less able or those who have special educational needs, resulting in all the students in a class tackling the same work, with extension tasks for the fastest workers. Despite learning objectives identifying what all, most and some of the students will learn, the chosen activities do not enable each student to reach the appropriate objective. The link between each activity and the intended learning is not made precisely enough. Time is not used consistently well, with low-level tasks often slowing students' progress. Teachers still tend to dominate the talking or take answers from a few individuals without drawing others into discussion, and this impedes the development of students' reasoning and speaking skills. However, some effective one-to-one and small-group discussions show teachers' potential for checking and moving learning on more securely, for instance by using mini-plenaries to make teaching points or clarify misunderstanding.

A positive development observed in some lessons was an increase in the use of discussion. While this exposed weaknesses in students' communication skills, there is scope for teachers to build students' confidence and use of technical vocabulary by modelling good quality responses and reasoning, and making literacy prompts readily available. Currently, not all staff model good written and spoken English. In the very best lessons, teachers and their assistants used discussion skilfully to excite and enthuse their students about the learning ahead and to draw in the most reluctant speakers. Such strategies enabled Year 7 students, in a drama lesson, to develop quickly their confidence in speaking, listening and performing. Similar highly challenging group discussion with demonstration, led by the teacher, ensured that Year 11 students made good progress in refining and sustaining characterisation in their performance of the hand-jive sequence from the film 'Grease'.

While the academy has established data systems and introduced the use of National Curriculum levels and grades in lesson planning and in regular assessment of students' work, significant inconsistencies and weaknesses remain. More work is required to ensure assessment is consistently accurate, and marking provides useful feedback. Less attention has been given to improving the quality of day-to-day assessment in lessons, such as questioning that checks and probes students' understanding, with follow-up questions to encourage students to think more deeply, adapting lessons accordingly, and using assessment to give clarity of expectations of what students will learn.

During the visit, teachers engaged positively in discussions with inspectors on how they might improve their practice. This suggests that the potential for improving the quality of teaching and use of assessment to check and deepen learning through a systematic whole-academy approach is considerable but requires wholehearted commitment from all staff.

Inspectors focused on the curriculum in Years 7 and 8, particularly the thematic 'Opening Minds' provision which now encompasses a narrower range of subjects. The academy has

tackled the area for improvement satisfactorily: schemes of work have been developed, drawing on students' views, and these clarify the competences and functional skills to be taught and assessed. Students enjoy the topics studied and collaborate well in groups. However, the practice observed during the visit raises some concerns including: the quality of teaching and level of challenge for all the students in each class; how well English skills are promoted or built upon; how effectively new knowledge and skills are consolidated; the expectations of students and the quality of feedback on their work.

The previous monitoring visit identified a number of safeguarding issues which have been tackled with suitable urgency, leading to a greater sense of responsibility and accountability across the academy. A few inconsistencies in the implementation of risk assessments and the taking of registers remain.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2010:

- Build on recent work to increase the proportion of teaching that is good or better, ensuring:
 - lesson planning takes account of students' needs and potential to provide activities that challenge all students appropriately, especially the more able
 - teachers use assessment effectively in lessons to check all students' progress and further their learning through good quality feedback on their work.

Inadequate progress

- Develop further the schemes of work for Years 7 and 8 and provide guidance for teachers on:
 - the specific competencies and functional skills to be taught
 - securing progression in these skills as well as in subject content
 - the assessment of students' progress in the skills and subjects
 and ensure effective liaison between leaders who oversee this curriculum and the directors of learning for subjects.

Satisfactory progress

- Ensure consistent application of safeguarding arrangements.

Satisfactory progress

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The new leadership structure, devised by the Executive Principal, Principal and governing body, and implemented from June 2011, has led to improvements in the clarity of roles and in the drive to tackle weaknesses, and underpins a stronger capacity to improve. The Principal and four Vice-Principals, each of whom leads on key areas of the academies' work, show a clear understanding of the priorities for improvement and the next steps to be taken. Each shows a realistic grasp of the strengths and weaknesses within their areas of responsibility. The Executive Principal provides a strategic overview to the work of both academies and is overseeing the development of the new building. He has also dealt with

some significant issues such as finance and staffing, aspects of which have presented considerable barriers to improvement. This has allowed the other senior leaders to focus on improving the quality of provision and outcomes for students.

The Principal has implemented a number of practices that are already established at the boys' academy, including the performance management of staff, which is now up to date. A suitable system of line management has been introduced with regular meetings between middle and senior leaders. The learning leads for English, mathematics and science hold responsibility for their subjects across both academies, supported by other post-holders on each site. A calendar of monitoring activities has been introduced but there is scope to sharpen the foci and to increase the speed and rigour with which identified weaknesses are tackled, while ensuring good practice is shared.

The leadership of teaching has strengthened further and inadequate teaching is now robustly challenged. While the academy can point to evidence of better teaching by some individual teachers, the proportion of good or outstanding teaching has not risen sufficiently.

The academy drew up action plans following the monitoring visit in December. Although the plans shared a common format, they showed a number of the same weaknesses as previously; for instance, success criteria were described in terms of completion of tasks rather than their impact. This did not aid evaluation of the effectiveness of actions taken or the identification of the next steps. The most recent plan focuses on appropriate priorities.

The governing body currently has five vacancies, including two for one of the academy's sponsors, Manchester City Council, and a parent governor. The representatives of Manchester College provide committed leadership to the governing body, and the college continues to supply financial expertise to the academy. However, the minutes of meetings do not indicate a clear understanding of the seriousness of the academy's situation. There is limited recorded challenge, in particular on the progress being made on areas for improvement and on interpreting and questioning internal and external performance data. The Principal's most recent report to the governing body was succinct and painted a realistic picture of the positives and key issues for both academies.

Progress on the area for improvement identified by the inspection in December 2010:

- Improve the effectiveness of leadership and management at all levels in driving more rapid improvement and eradicating inconsistencies by:
 - defining clear lines of accountability, ensuring roles and responsibilities are well understood by all staff
 - establishing systems for rigorous monitoring and evaluation of all aspects of the academy's work
 - sharpening the quality of action planning, setting clear priorities and success criteria, and paying attention to the related development needs of staff.

Satisfactory progress

External support

The academy has drawn on external support on a number of fronts including the development of middle-level leadership. However, it needs to guard against reliance on external assessments of the quality of its work, and develop the use of such external views as a way of checking its own processes and self-evaluation. Reports from the Academy Improvement Partner and an external consultant who conducted a 'mock inspection' of the academy are overly positive, creating a false picture of the academy's effectiveness, which is impeding improvement. For instance, the 'mock inspection' judged three quarters of the teaching to be good or outstanding which does not tally with the data regarding students' progress.

Main Judgements

The academy has made inadequate progress in raising attainment. This monitoring inspection has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the academy's performance will be monitored.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment, particularly throughout Key Stage 3 and that of more-able students in both key stages, ensuring teachers' assessment of students' work is accurate.
- Improve students' skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing to support the development of their reasoning skills by:
 - establishing appropriately high whole-academy expectations for written and spoken communication, and
 - providing guidance for staff on how best to promote these skills.
- Adopt a systematic approach to raising the quality of teaching across the academy, by:
 - increasing the focus on learning and progress in lessons and over time, taking account of students' varied starting points
 - strengthening teachers' use of questioning, discussion and monitoring of students' work in lessons to check learning and probe understanding
 - ensuring lesson planning sequences learning effectively, using time well and selecting good quality activities
 - enriching the learning environment in classes and around the academy.
- Improve the influence of leadership and management, particularly of the governing body and at middle leadership levels, on driving improvement by:
 - increasing the rigour of monitoring activities, introducing more effective follow-up on areas for development and sharing best practice
 - making better strategic use of monitoring information and performance data to identify and tackle weaknesses and inconsistencies.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, 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

Cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DfE

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