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Mr K Pailthorpe
Principal
The Eastbourne Academy
Brodrick Road
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Dear Mr Pailthorpe

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Eastbourne Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Patricia Metham HMI to your academy on 4 and 5 October 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 and other staff, groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and another governor, and a representative of the sponsors. Twenty two lessons were observed, three of which were joint observations with senior staff. A wide range of documentation was scrutinised, including the academy's analysis of the achievements of students in the 2011 examinations, its self-evaluation and development plan, various policies, and evidence of compliance with safeguarding requirements with respect to the appointment of staff.

Context

The academy is beginning the second year of its implementation phase. Its lead sponsor is Sussex Downs College, with East Sussex County Council as co-sponsor. The University of Brighton is an education partner. The transition period over which the predecessor school became an academy was briefer than usual. The academy's specialisms are in science and digital technologies. It is smaller than the average

secondary school with 636 students on role, the majority of whom come from a White British background. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is lower than the national average. There are a significant number of students who arrive at times other than the start of Year 7. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above the national average and the main area of need arises from behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. The proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals is above the national average and is increasing. Teaching staff turnover over the last academic year has been average and there are no special difficulties in recruiting staff at the academy. The academy is structured as three smaller learning communities or 'schools', whose individual characters are fostered, but whose work is coordinated.

Students' achievements and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Students' attainment is still low but it is improving in some key respects. The proportion obtaining five or more good GCSEs or their equivalent was 91% in 2011 and this represents a significant achievement for the new academy. However, the proportion obtaining five or more good GCSEs or their equivalent including English and mathematics was 34%, which is below average. This points to underlying weaknesses in students' development of literacy and numeracy skills. The gap between boys' and girls' achievement has been wider than that seen nationally but there is evidence of this closing in some areas. Some subjects, including those in the performing arts, have results above the national average but results in many subjects fall below, and some significantly below, national outcomes. Achievement in science is good due to students following the BTEC course, which is appropriate to their needs and is being delivered well. Attainment in mathematics is a particular area of concern. All of the academy's students left in 2011 with a qualification.

Students enter the academy with levels of attainment significantly below the national average. Last year's Year 11 made better progress than previous cohorts. The quality of learning currently in the academy is at least satisfactory in the great majority of lessons, and good or better in some such as in the performing arts and in physical education. The progress made by students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is in line with their peers, and is sometimes better when extremely well-managed provision successfully combines academic guidance with pastoral care. The academy is justifiably proud of its 'dyslexia friendly' status and its impact on some students.

Other relevant student outcomes

Attendance remains low but there are signs of gradual improvement over the last year and so far this year. The academy has prioritised tackling persistent absenteeism, and the importance of good attendance is continually emphasised, for example in assemblies. The academy is aware that absence levels have a significant adverse effect on standards. However, strategies over the last year have lacked

clarity and significant impact. Punctuality is improving and students generally arrive on time for lessons.

Behaviour has improved over the last year. Students across the age range feel safer, and more confident that any difficulties will be quickly and effectively resolved by staff or by other students. They now move around the academy in an orderly and thoughtful manner. There is some boisterous behaviour in corridors but it is not disruptive. The academy's work to develop an ethos that supports better quality learning has been successful and many students speak of improvements in the behaviour of their peers in lessons. Attitudes to learning are generally positive and willing but students are uncritical of the quality of their understanding in too many lessons, and do not often show independence and enterprise in their approach.

There is a growing number of important opportunities for students to develop leadership skills by contributing to the work of the academy by, for example, being prefects, student supporters, peer mediators and sports leaders. Students adopting such roles gain in confidence as a result.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching is broadly satisfactory and is improving because of the use of a wide range of good quality strategies that are carefully coordinated. There is now more teaching that is outstanding, and inadequate practice is being addressed successfully. Senior leaders gauge the quality of teaching accurately.

At its best, teaching structures learning so that students feel responsible for organising their own work; they respond successfully and with evident enjoyment when given this opportunity. In one physical education lesson observed, students were organising and carrying out ways of gauging various types of fitness, and were also developing good team-working and leadership skills. The teacher guided their work skilfully and used questioning to probe understanding, steering the learning well as a consequence. In such lessons students' confidence is boosted and they are often surprised by their achievements.

Too often, teachers do not assess students' understanding and the progress they are making over each part of a lesson often enough, or effectively. This limits the capacity to provide for the needs of individuals and groups of learners to ensure that they make good or better progress. In these lessons there is an over-emphasis on the teacher giving instruction, which requires a limited range of responses from students. In such cases, students' aspirations and ambitions are not raised sufficiently rapidly.

Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities benefit from individual support in mainstream lessons, small-group teaching, booster sessions and one-to-one literacy support. The Centre for Induction and Acceleration (CIA) is keeping vulnerable students engaged in study and well integrated within the academy. This

is because of its careful consultation with families and students, good liaison with external agencies, programmes of study that are meticulously tailored to individual needs and interests, and comprehensive support for teachers when students return to mainstream classes. This provision is having an outstanding impact on many students' well-being and achievement.

The curriculum is going through a well-planned and extensive review in response to national changes, particularly those to do with vocational courses. There is a lack of any strongly coordinated approach to the development of literacy and numeracy skills across all subjects, beyond the special literacy lessons in Year 7. This leads to opportunities being missed in lessons in Year 8 and above to reinforce students' learning in mathematics and English by applying it consistently in novel situations.

Through the science specialism work, the science department contributes to inter-school events such as science days, but it does not have a significant impact on improving teaching and learning or curriculum development across the academy. Specialism funding has been used to upgrade digital technology resources and to provide training, both in the academy and in local primary schools. This supports the better progress being made. Long-term absentees are encouraged to maintain a programme of study through home-based technology provided by the academy.

Although the number of permanent exclusions from the academy last year was high, increasing use is being made of the CIA to retain students at risk of dropping out of education. The quality of care, guidance and support is good overall, and the procedures for ensuring the safety and well-being of students are thorough, including in the provision of appropriate training for all staff.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The academy's improvement plan emphasises priority areas such as attendance, teaching, achievement and the forthcoming building project appropriately, and gives the academy a clear sense of direction. Actions, resource implications and responsibilities are assigned to each key target area. Senior leaders show commitment to implementing these priorities and regularly monitor and report progress toward the desired outcomes. However, some outcomes are expressed with insufficient precision to enable effective in-year monitoring and a clear evaluation of the impact of the work. Not all policies are fully implemented yet, or monitored sufficiently well to gauge and influence impact. Neither are there clear examples of how a sufficiently wide range of innovative and novel approaches to the academy's obvious priorities are being used to generate step-changes in standards. The sponsors and the governing body have a very clear idea of how they want to see the academy develop, and they show vision and challenge in their support for its work. They have very clear views on how the academy is progressing and look for more pioneering approaches to developing solutions to some of the challenges it faces.

Middle leaders are developing their capacity to contribute to the academy's ambition to raise achievement. Curriculum leaders work well with the directors of learning and

the vice principal with responsibility for teaching and learning to improve aspects of teaching. Some, however, are at an early stage of developing their skills to drive up the quality of teaching and, although there are positive signs, this is reflected in the wide variation in attainment across subject areas.

External support

The academy receives good support from its School Improvement Partner and from a range of external consultants through its sponsors, including the local authority, and through The Schools Network. Heads of subject benefit from subject specific advice and support with specific issues, and many take part in leadership development opportunities. There are useful links beginning to be established with other academies.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards and is demonstrating a capacity to secure further improvements.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of teaching that is good or better by building on current strategies and developing a greater number and range of highly coordinated academy-wide tactics. Teaching should involve the frequent assessment of students' understanding and progress during every lesson, and the use of this information to steer learning strongly.
- Raise attainment through improvements to the quality of teaching, and by increasing levels of expectations of students' achievement in all classrooms. As an aspect of this, adapt provision in lessons to suit the needs of all groups of students better.
- Improve attendance to at least the national average by employing a number of tightly coordinated strategies across all three schools in the academy. These should involve continuing the targeting of persistent absence, and casual absence for unacceptable reasons.

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

Alan Taylor-Bennett

Her Majesty's Inspector