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Mr B Hersom
Principal
Colchester Academy
Hawthorne Avenue
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Dear Mr Hersom

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Colchester Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 18–19 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 associate principal, the vice-principal, two groups of students and the Vice-Chair of the Governing Board, who is also a representative of the sponsors.

Context

Colchester Academy opened in 2010 in existing buildings and all staff transferred from the predecessor school. It caters for 11 to 16 year-olds from the immediate surrounding area. The vast majority are White British, with very few from minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is much higher than the national average. The percentage of students that have special educational needs and/or disabilities, including statements, is above the national average. The academy specialises in English and health sciences. It is sponsored by Colchester Institute. The local authority's plans to merge two local schools with the predecessor school to form a large academy did not go ahead. This

has resulted in reducing numbers of students on roll. The roll is not projected to rise until 2015. In its first year, a programme of redundancies reduced staffing by 26. The academy has appointed a lead practitioner in science but has had difficulty in recruiting similar roles in English and in mathematics. New buildings are planned for 2013.

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

In its first year, the academy has had an immediate impact on improving results in Key Stage 4. The percentage attaining five or more A* to C grades or equivalent increased significantly from 46% to 69%. The percentage of students attaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics rose to 49%. This was 14% higher than the results achieved by the predecessor school and very close to the academy's aspirational target. These improvements are mainly due to carefully targeted support for all students in Year 11 to help them succeed. The percentage of students attaining at least a grade C in English, the academy's specialism, showed a modest increase to 57%, but results increased significantly in mathematics from 44% to 55% and in science from 21% to 64%. This year, the academy is maintaining its proven procedures to boost the attainment of students in Years 10 and 11.

The academy has rightly focused its efforts on ensuring that older students leave school with the qualifications needed to progress into further education, training or the workplace. The dramatic improvements seen in Key Stage 4 are not matched lower down in the academy. Some students in Key Stage 3 told inspectors that they feel they are not achieving as well as they should. The percentage of Year 9 students attaining the expected levels in English and mathematics declined in 2011 to well below the national average. Despite their low prior attainment on entry to Year 7, this represents inadequate progress. The academy has not been successful in raising the achievement of all groups of students. Girls outperform boys and those known to be eligible for free school meals do significantly less well than others. The majority of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities underachieve because the guidance and support provided for them is inadequate. Senior leaders are aware of these shortcomings. Currently, some senior and middle leaders with responsibility for monitoring these areas are having little impact on raising students' achievement.

Assessment data is systematically collected twice-termly to gauge students' progress. Although the aim is to identify those at risk of underachieving, middle leaders make insufficient use of this data to identify who needs additional support and teachers do not use it to plan lessons that meet the needs of all students. Currently, tracking data shows that a significant proportion of students continue to underachieve in a range of subjects. Observations by inspectors confirmed this, noting that students made inadequate progress in half of all lessons seen.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Improvements made to the management of behaviour are noted in recent external monitoring and by students who say it is much better than in the past. They say that they are kept safe and enjoy the academy, but younger students feel that bullying has not been eliminated and are concerned about a small number of students from other schools congregating outside of the school perimeter. Most students behave well but, in a minority lessons, teachers do not manage behaviour effectively. Students know what the 'consequences' are for poor behaviour. They say that the academy's 'consequences' system usually works but it can be undermined when sanctions are not applied consistently by all staff. Exclusion rates were high last year but they are beginning to fall as the expectations of staff become embedded. The academy inherited a number of older students with high absence rates and overall attendance was low last year. It is improving and, so far this year, attendance is similar to the national average.

The effectiveness of provision

Lesson observations by senior leaders and external consultants judge the quality of teaching to be mostly satisfactory and regularly good. Observations by inspectors, including some carried out jointly with senior teachers, found some satisfactory and good teaching, but also found a high proportion of inadequate teaching. Students make good progress when teachers plan challenging, practical tasks that capture their interest, when they let them work together in pairs and small groups and set clear timescales for completing work. Most teachers use 'traffic lights' and whiteboards to check on students' understanding but only a few test the students to make sure that their learning is fully secured. Progress slows significantly when teachers talk for too long and provide too few opportunities for students to work independently or discuss their learning. Some teachers' expectations of students are too low; they plan work that is far too easy and lacks challenge.

The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been condensed into Years 7 and 8 so students commence their GCSE and vocational studies from Year 9 onwards. This is quite new and has not been evaluated to gauge its impact. Some Year 9 students voiced concerns about their lack of basic skills to cope with the rigour of GCSE courses. Committed staff provide after-school study support, including one-to-one tuition, but other enrichment opportunities are restricted to a small range of sports and performing arts activities. Students feel cared for and know who to approach for help. The good quality support for targeted groups of older students is having a direct impact on their achievement, but this does not extend to students of all ages and abilities.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The principal, ably supported by the associate principal, is tackling the legacy of underachievement inherited from the predecessor school by driving a number of significant improvements, most notably the higher results achieved by Year 11 students. At the same time, he has managed a challenging period of staffing reductions and reduced budgets due to reduced numbers of students on roll. Decisive action has helped to eradicate some inadequate teaching, but not all of it. Whole-school training to improve teachers' effectiveness is underway and is leading to some improvements, but needs more time to have an impact on improved outcomes for all students. There are suitably prioritised improvement plans, and self-evaluation is being strengthened by mini-evaluations by subject leaders. The leadership of other senior and some middle leaders is far too variable. Some are unclear about their roles and responsibilities in driving improvements and others are not held fully accountable for the attainments achieved by students. Currently, there is insufficient capacity to secure sustained improvements to the quality of teaching, behaviour and outcomes for all students. This is a major impediment to the academy's further improvement. The governing board ensure that statutory duties, including safeguarding, are fully met. They display a thorough understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses and provide effective support and challenge for the principal.

External support

The academy has welcomed the support and challenge provided by its School Improvement Partner and has bought-in additional consultancy support to evaluate its effectiveness in its first year. It has forged partnerships with the local authority to address personnel issues and with a school in a neighbouring authority to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising attainment but its capacity to make further improvements is being compromised by weaknesses in teaching and by the variability in the quality of leadership and management.

Priorities for further improvement

- Accelerate the achievement of all students by:
 - extending the programme of interventions to support learners in Key Stage 3
 - adding further rigour to monitoring procedures so that boys, students known to be eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities receive the guidance and support needed to achieve as well as others.

- Eradicate inadequate teaching and increase the proportion of good or better teaching by:
 - requiring all subject leaders to agree with their staff what the key features of an effective lesson are and incorporating them into the academy’s policy for teaching and learning
 - checking that these key features are embedded into all lessons by observing staff and targeting additional monitoring, training and support for those who need it most
 - raising teachers’ expectations of what students are capable of achieving
 - applying behaviour management procedures consistently in every lesson
 - regularly scrutinising teachers’ planning to check that they are using assessment information effectively to plan learning for students of different abilities.

- Generate greater capacity to secure further improvements by:
 - reaffirming the roles and responsibilities of all senior leaders and measuring the impact of their work on improving outcomes for students, especially in Key Stage 3
 - providing additional guidance and training for subject leaders, heads of faculty and heads of year in the use of assessment data to monitor students’ academic progress, and gauge the effectiveness of this monitoring on improving the outcomes for students
 - making middle leaders fully accountable for the attainment achieved in their subjects.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Board and the Academies Group at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty’s Inspector

cc Danny Clough, Chair of the Governing Board
 The Academies Group, DfE [colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk]