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Mr N McQuoid
Principal
Waterhead Academy
Roxbury Avenue
Oldham
OL4 5JE

Dear Mr McQuoid

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Waterhead Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Sara Morrissey HMI to your academy on 2–3 November 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 first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with senior leaders, staff, groups of students, and a representative of the governing body and the academy's sponsor.

Context

Waterhead Academy, which is considerably larger than most secondary schools, opened in September 2010 following the closure of two neighbouring Oldham schools. It currently operates on two sites, just over two miles apart, called the Roxbury campus and the Moorside campus, which are the sites of the two former schools. In autumn 2012, the academy takes possession of a new purpose-built building with modern facilities on a single site. In the school year 2010/11, almost all except Year 7 students in the academy were previously students at one of the two schools that closed. The academy is sponsored by The Oldham College and has specialisms in creative technologies (which include creative and performing arts and technology subjects) and English.

About half of the students are of White British heritage and 40% from Pakistani heritage. Small numbers from several different ethnic groups make up the remainder of the academy. Overall, the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is high relative to other schools. The academy replaced two schools where there was little ethnic diversity. Roughly one third of the students are known to be eligible for a free school meal, which is well above average. The proportion of students with special educational needs

September 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

and/or disabilities is above average but the proportion with a statement of special educational needs is low.

The principal appointed in September 2009, to oversee setting up the academy, left after seven months in post. A new principal took up post in April 2010 and led the academy through its first year before leaving in August 2011. At the time of the inspection, an interim principal was in post. The majority of staff at the academy previously worked at one of the two former schools.

On three days each week, students are taught on the site of the predecessor school that they used to attend or would have attended; on the other two days, Key Stage 3 students are taught at the Roxbury campus and Key Stage 4 students are taught at the Moorside campus.

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

The 2011 GCSE results show a small improvement in relation to the most recent results at the two predecessor schools. For example, the proportion of students gaining five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, rose by approximately three percentage points. Attainment remains below average, although comfortably above the government's floor targets. GCSE results for English and mathematics reflect students' overall attainment, although, in 2011, fewer students gained the highest A* and A grades than in the predecessor schools. The academy's specialist subjects make a strong contribution to its results at GCSE. Gaps between the attainment of different groups of students are generally smaller than the gaps seen nationally. For example, students entitled to a free school meal attain standards that are much closer to those of other groups than is the case in most schools.

The academy's data on current students and the progress seen in lessons during the inspection indicate that students make satisfactory progress in lessons and over time. The proportion of students making the expected three National Curriculum levels of progress in English and in mathematics is in line with other schools nationally. More students make the expected progress in English than in mathematics. Students enjoy their learning and generally respond well to the tasks that they are set. Most lessons take place in a calm atmosphere, where positive relationships between staff and students help to promote learning. A small minority of students show half-hearted attitudes to learning; they give up too easily and work well only when under close supervision. Students told members of the inspection team that the communities of the two predecessor schools have merged well and that students generally get on well together. They particularly enjoy the opportunities provided by the 'working-together' days, which have extended friendship groups and offered new experiences.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance is broadly average and has improved since the academy opened. Trends in attendance are closely monitored by a dedicated team of staff and absence is followed up rigorously. The proportion of persistent absentees is higher than average. Academy leaders have a clear understanding of the individual needs of the students in this group and work closely with external agencies to increase their rate of attendance. However, more detailed analysis of data would help to establish the impact of the academy's actions to raise attendance of this group in the short and medium term. Punctuality is satisfactory overall but too many students show casual attitudes to punctuality, both at the beginning of the day and when moving between lessons. Academy leaders have recognised this issue and have plans to give greater priority to improving punctuality.

Students report that behaviour has improved and that expectations of them have been increased. A consistent approach to behaviour management across the two sites reinforces key messages about what is expected, together with associated rewards and sanctions. These are clearly understood by students. In lessons, students are generally well behaved and responsive to teachers' instructions. Some teaching allows students to remain passive rather than take active responsibility for their learning and, occasionally, behaviour deteriorates where tasks are not matched to students' learning needs. The proportion of fixed-term exclusions has fallen significantly since the academy opened as a result of coordinated strategies to meet the needs of those most vulnerable. Leaders have tailored programmes of study to meet the needs of those who are most at risk of exclusion.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching is improving as staff develop strategies to work together across the two sites and are beginning to share good practice more routinely. However, this remains at an early stage of development. Most lessons are well planned and establish a positive climate for learning. In the more successful lessons, teachers use their good subject knowledge to challenge students' thinking and to move learning forward at a brisk pace; teachers have a lively teaching style and organise well-chosen activities and resources to support learning. Where teaching is less effective, planning focuses on tasks rather than learning and activities are not tailored sufficiently to meet the full range of needs; consequently, students experience work that is insufficiently challenging and do not make the progress they might. In other lessons, teachers dominate for too much of the lesson and do not encourage students to take responsibility for their learning. Teachers sometimes miss opportunities to assess learning during lessons.

Academy leaders have a broadly accurate view of the quality of teaching but have not yet established the common characteristics of good teaching that can be shared and developed consistently across the academy to secure good progress across all years.

The curriculum is complex and under ongoing development. A wide range of one- and two-year GCSE courses is available to Key Stage 4 students as well as courses offered by The

Oldham College. Working-together days are proving effective in bringing the communities from both sites together, although this places pressure on the use of specialist accommodation. Managers have restructured provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and adopted a holistic approach across the two sites. New systems allow the early identification of students' specific learning needs so that support can be provided quickly to overcome barriers to learning. Strategies to increase the accountability of all staff for raising achievement of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are at an early stage of development; leaders are aware that staff may require additional training and support to help them tailor activities to meet the needs of all students. Students report that they feel well supported and cared for. They are confident they can turn to staff for help if required.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Senior leaders and teaching staff have helped to raise students' attainment during a period of substantial change and significant challenges. The academy has experienced an unusually high degree of change in senior leadership since it was set up. As a result it has been difficult for all staff to gain a view of the long-term strategic direction to be taken. The principal has articulated a vision for the future that is beginning to have an impact. Middle leaders enjoy the confidence of senior staff, and offer enthusiasm and a commitment to raising attainment. Subject leaders are beginning to establish a sense of teamwork among staff in their subject areas. Requirements for middle leaders to take additional responsibility for teaching and financial management within subject areas are beginning to develop the academy's capacity to improve.

Governors offer robust challenge to the school's senior leaders. Some aspects of the governors' role are less well developed and governors are developing the range of their expertise. Self-evaluation is accurate; senior leaders have a realistic view of the strengths and weaknesses of the academy. Current plans for improvement have appropriate areas of focus, such as giving priority to developing teaching and learning so as to build students' good learning habits throughout the academy. Leaders and managers are aware of the need to confirm the accuracy and consistency of teachers' assessment in order to monitor students' progress over time more robustly.

Leaders and managers monitor the achievement of different groups of students carefully. They have been successful in narrowing gaps in attainment, for example between the students based at the two different sites. Parents and carers are now considerably more positive about the academy than when it was first proposed or set up.

External support

The academy's sponsor offers a broad range of support. A substantial number of students from Years 10 and 11 study vocational subjects at The Oldham College for two days per week and this has had a positive impact on the attendance and attitudes of most of the students involved. The academy has benefited from additional support from the college with

administrative functions such as human resources and budget-setting. In addition, the Young People's Learning Agency has provided support and advice on financial matters. During the first year of the academy, the School Improvement Partner identified areas for improvement that gave governors some key insights and helped in their long-term planning.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop teaching so that more lessons are good or better through:
 - pitching work at a level that offers more consistent pace and challenge
 - tailoring activities to meet the needs of all students in the group
 - ensuring that lesson activities focus on developing students' learning
 - taking steps to ensure that learning is taking place as the lesson progresses and having evidence to justify it
 - giving students more opportunities to develop skills of independent learning.
- Improve students' punctuality.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Paul Chambers

Her Majesty's Inspector