

18 November 2011

Mrs M O'Connor
Principal
Thornaby Academy
Baysdale Road
Thornaby
Stockton-on-Tees
TS17 9DS

Dear Mrs O'Connor

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Thornaby Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy with Honoree Gordon HMI on the 16 and 17 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 the first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal and senior leaders, the Chair of Governors, a representative from the sponsors, middle leaders and various staff and groups of students.

Context

The academy opened in September 2010 in the buildings of the predecessor school. The lead sponsor is Teesside University with co-sponsors, Stockton Sixth Form College, Stockton Riverside College and Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council. 'Partnership for Schools' funding will see work begin during the spring of 2012 to substantially remodel the existing buildings. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is high. Most students are White British; few of those students from minority ethnic communities speak English as an additional language. A high percentage of students have special educational needs and/or disabilities – the largest group having behavioural difficulties. A small number of students have a statement of special educational needs.

Well over two-thirds of the senior leadership team were appointed to the academy and about 60% of the teaching staff. The academy Principal took up her post in September 2010.

September 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

The academy inherited a significant long-term deficit in students' attainment. Its first set of GCSE results in 2011 showed a marked increase in the proportion of students gaining five or more good GCSE passes, including English and mathematics. While attainment remains below average, this represents a 15% gain over the predecessor school's 2010 scores. The proportion of students gaining five or more good GCSE passes overall is well-above average with vocational options contributing strongly.

There is variability in the performance of some groups of students. Girls' attainment is much higher than boys while students known to be eligible for free school meals perform below the level of other students. Well-targeted interventions are helping individual students and cohorts to increase overall rates of progress and the pace has quickened since the academy opened. Nonetheless, too many, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, do not make expected progress in English and mathematics. In 2011, boys made better progress than girls and from a much lower starting point. The new electronic tracking system has the capacity to strengthen procedures which monitor students' performance and to identify underachievement. It offers greater efficiency and accuracy but its introduction is recent and requires time to become fully operational.

Students' behaviour is mostly satisfactory in lessons and is often good. In almost all classes there is a calm atmosphere for learning with students exhibiting positive attitudes and a keenness to do well. Teachers employ an effective range of strategies for managing behaviour with academy-wide systems in place to check students' compliance. In corridor areas, behaviour can at times be more boisterous despite a high staff presence. Students say that they feel safe and well cared for. They express confidence in staff to provide support when difficulties arise. Attendance is low but improving. The academy is using an appropriate range of targeted strategies to improve matters. Expectations are clear with sanctions rigorously enforced. Persistent absence is high but is declining and fixed-term exclusions are reducing well. There have been no permanent exclusions.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching and learning continue to improve. Inspectors saw several good lessons, though the quality of teaching is still inconsistent and is mostly satisfactory. None is inadequate.

The academy's lesson planning structure ensures that teachers use appropriate methodology in the classroom, including effective use of information and communication technology. Lessons have clear aims, although the outcomes expected for groups and individual students can be less specific. This results too often in all students undertaking the same task irrespective of their ability and despite teachers having access to assessment information which is clear in defining students' prior attainment. The teacher's role at the start of lessons is well planned and effective, setting a positive context for learning. However, other than in the best lessons, teachers spend too much time reacting to

individual queries rather than engaging students actively in their learning and this reduces the pace of progress.

Students' response in lessons varies. The large majority of older students, and most in Years 7 and 8, demonstrate maturity and commitment to their studies. A small proportion of younger students however, including some who are less-able, show compliance in lessons rather than enthusiasm. They tend to be overly dependent on teachers because they lack confidence in their own ability and their weak basic skills limit their capacity to work independently. A few also exhibit immature, off-task behaviours and these act as a brake on progress.

While there are examples of very valuable support offered by teaching assistants, their deployment and effectiveness are inconsistent. Senior leaders recognise the need for further training so that all assistants can be deployed more effectively and engage more productively in supporting students' learning.

The curriculum offers good choice through Key Stage 4 pathways, responding well to students' interests. There is increasing emphasis on promoting students' literacy skills in both key stages. Initiatives, for example, to raise the profile of reading are in place. The curriculum has innovative features including the thematic approach in Years 7 and 8 aimed at fostering students' independence and resilience. Subject option days for older students demonstrate the academy's intention to offer flexible and creative approaches to learning and are proving to be successful. The impact of the academy's specialism is evident across many aspects of its work and particularly so in the increasing drive to promote skills that are essential for students in their future lives, including an emphasis on collaborative and team working. The personal, social and health curriculum makes a good contribution to helping students keep safe. The academy offers a wide range of extra-curricular clubs and activities which are popular with students and which are helping to build students' commitment to the academy.

A clear over-arching structure that supports students' pastoral development is in place and is effective. In-school communication between teachers, faculties and support managers in tracking students' personal development is working well. An effective system of alerts is routinely monitored by staff so that students who experience difficulties can be quickly identified. Restructuring plans to harmonise the working of pastoral and academic support teams are timely and well-considered.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The Principal, senior leaders, sponsors and governors demonstrate a resolute focus on improving the quality of provision, raising attainment and in tackling long-standing underachievement. These objectives form the core of the academy's strategic and operational priorities and drive the improvement agenda. Collectively, they share an insightful understanding of where improvement is required because of the academy's rigorous culture of self-evaluation. Very effective leadership from the Principal and the



senior team has underpinned the improvements to date. Expectations of students' capabilities are high. There is clear line of sight in staff accountability for students' learning and progress through the academy's performance management system.

Partnership working is strong and the benefits of sponsor engagement in post-16 planning have been key features in all Year 11 students finding employment, training or further education places in summer 2011. Academy leaders are working diligently to promote strong liaison with partner primary schools to effect smooth transition and offer support. The academy's work is particularly strong in supporting students whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Child protection is central to the academy's work. Safeguarding procedures and all aspects of health and safety are secure and supported by effective and proactive working with support agencies.

External support

Good support from Stockton local authority is evident in moves to improve attendance where a firm stance towards individual absence is now established and is impacting successfully in reduced absence. Work with the local authority is also proving effective in promoting the academy's child protection strategy. Durham local authority School Improvement Professionals have contributed productively to training senior and middle leaders in developing lesson observation and moderation skills and through targeted work to raise standards. Effective leadership development has also resulted from engagement with the specialist schools and academies trust, particularly during the academy's first year.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that all staff make effective use of the new electronic assessment facility so that students' progress can be tracked in careful detail, underachievement can be identified quickly and that teachers use it effectively when planning lessons so that the needs of all students are met.
- Improve the attainment of boys and those known to be eligible for free school meals so that the gap between current performance and national average can be closed as quickly as possible.

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

September 2011

Tom Grieveson
Her Majesty's Inspector