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9 December 2011

Mrs Lynne Heath
Manchester Communication Academy
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Dear Mrs Heath

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Manchester Communication Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on Wednesday 7 December 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 held meetings with the principal, staff, groups of students, and a group of governors, which included representatives of the sponsors.

Context

Manchester Communication Academy is a new high school that opened in the north of the city in September 2010. It currently has two years of intake. Recruitment is on target with a total of 462 students in Years 7 and 8. Almost half the students are eligible for free school meals, which is well above average. Six students have a statement of special educational needs, and almost a third of all students have been identified as having additional needs. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is higher than the national average, but the number at an early stage of learning to speak English as an additional language is low. The academy's specialism is communications. Its sponsors are BT, Manchester College and the local authority.

September 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

A large majority of students enjoy their lessons, and they participate well in a wide range of additional learning activities outside formal lessons. It is too early to judge their long-term progress as the academy has not yet had a cohort of students completing Key Stage 3 or taking public examinations. Targets have been set for students using information from their previous level of attainment and further testing when they started Year 7. Students enter the school with attainment levels below average. The targets they are set are challenging. They are based on students making one level of progress in each subject annually. Progress against targets is monitored regularly and the academy's tracking system shows the majority of students are on course to meet their targets. Inspectors found students to be making good progress in the large majority of sessions observed. Data from the academy shows no significant difference in progress between groups of students. Inspectors found this to be the case in most lessons, but in English the rate of progress varied too much and the most-able students in Year 8 were not reaching their full potential.

Students respond well to the academy's strategy to promote independent learning. They develop good research skills and are confident in the use of information and communication technology. They can retrieve information from a variety of sources and use this well to answer questions on project topics.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Most students show a positive attitude to learning. They are keen to do well and improve their work. The majority of students concentrate well when working independently. They behave well, show good respect for other people, and work well together in groups. Students feel safe at the academy. A minority of students are less well motivated. They do not complete their work on time, and occasionally distract others. Attendance is average and punctuality to lessons is good. Students are making good progress towards the individual targets they are set to encourage healthy lifestyles. They participate well in a range of fitness activities. Students are keen to take positions of responsibility and are enthusiastic about taking part in drama and music performances.

The effectiveness of provision

Teachers plan lessons well, often in teams. They make good use of the academy's excellent information and communication technology facilities to promote flexible styles of learning. Many make excellent use of peer assessment to help students to understand how well they are doing and how they can improve. In the majority of lessons, teachers present ideas in a lively way that captures the students' interest, questioning involves all students and follow-up work keeps students actively engaged. In the few less successful lessons, teachers do not monitor students' written work sharply enough to identify errors or uncertainty in their learning. On other occasions, they miss opportunities to probe students' understanding through their questioning or do not involve enough of the group in responding to questions.

The curriculum meets students' needs well. The grouping of subjects into areas of learning, each with an interlinked set of classrooms, is helping to develop teamwork and a consistency of approach among staff. As a result they promote the links between subjects and important key skills. An extensive range of additional clubs and learning activities provides valuable opportunities for students to get extra help with work and develop their interests or learn new skills. The academy successfully encourages a high rate of participation in the extended learning programme. All students attend at least one additional activity and many take part in several.

Transition arrangements with local primary schools are very effective. All potential entrants to the academy have a four-day induction programme, and students identified as potentially vulnerable receive additional targeted induction days. As a result students start Year 7 with increased confidence and ready to learn from the first week. The academy places a high priority on raising standards of literacy. It has in place a range of strategies to develop, particularly, students' reading skills. The academy has yet to formally evaluate the success of current strategies, but early indications are that interventions are having a positive effect on attitudes and helping students to catch up with age-related expectations. Good systems are in place to support students with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Leaders and managers provide a clear vision for the academy, which is well supported by staff. A culture of innovation is encouraged, which enables staff to introduce new ideas into the curriculum, and teaching and learning. Staff development plays a key role at the academy. A shortened school day on Friday allows all staff to participate in best practice workshops. The significant amount of team teaching that takes place also allows staff to share good practice. Formal observations of lessons are carried out by managers. Where inspectors carried out joint observations with academy staff, there was a close similarity in the judgements made. However, inspectors did not find as high a proportion of outstanding lessons as the internal observations noted. Performance management also takes place through an appropriate system of target-setting for individual staff, with reviews during the year and an annual assessment of achievements against targets.

The governing body includes a good range of expertise to support the development of the academy. Sponsors represented on the governing body, and other co-opted members, bring experience and contacts from the business sector, education and the local community. They provide a good level of challenge to the senior leadership team. Lead governors have been identified to monitor different strands of the organisation, such as teaching and learning, community links and finance. They meet monthly with the appropriate manager and monitoring reports are examined rigorously by a governors' strategy group and then by the whole board. The governing body is clear about its statutory responsibilities and training has taken place to support this role, for example, in safeguarding. The academy has appropriate safeguarding procedures in place.

The academy has a clear development plan and annual objectives. Reports on progress against key performance objectives are scrutinised regularly by managers and governors. This enables prompt identification of issues, for example, changes have been made to the delivery of the English curriculum. Self-assessment is carried out using a risk analysis approach, to identify potential risks to meeting targets and to put in place measures to mitigate this. Each curriculum area develops appropriate priorities for their work, based on the academy's overall objectives, and carries out detailed monitoring of progress against targets. Staff have appropriate subject knowledge and are well deployed. Plans are in place to deliver a Key Stage 4 curriculum from next year for students who are ready to benefit from this approach. The academy provides an orderly environment for learning and day-to-day management is smooth. The academy demonstrates good capacity for further development.

External support

The academy has made good use of external support. It works well with its sponsors. Links with the private sector have enabled the academy to introduce business methods into its practices. Work with the further education college, and with other schools, is supporting the development of curriculum pathways for learners who will enter Key Stage 4. The academy is making good progress with its target of involving the local community, and participating in economic regeneration activities. Partnership with the Manchester Adult Education Service has led to the successful recruitment of a significant number of local people onto courses that include literacy and job related skills. Links with local primary schools are strong and the academy was over-subscribed in the numbers of applications in its second year. The academy has worked closely with its School Improvement Partner. This work has helped it to identify areas for further improvement, for example, in the use of assessment methods that feed into students' progress reports. As a result of this, an increased amount of standardised testing has been introduced and there is more work to check the standard of work in students' books in order to moderate progress judgements across subjects.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Monitor closely the changes made to the delivery of the English curriculum to ensure all students are making the progress of which they are capable.
- Continue to spread good practice in teaching and learning to ensure sufficient checks on understanding take place in all lessons.
- Ensure that measures taken to increase the standardisation of assessment work are effective.

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

Sue Harrison
Her Majesty's Inspector