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Mr C Shepherd
Headmaster
The Priory Ruskin Academy
Rushcliffe Road
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Dear Mr Shepherd

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Priory Ruskin Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Linda Killman HMI to your academy on 12 and 13 January 2012, 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, including 24 lesson observations, scrutinised documents and met with nominated staff, groups of students and a representative from the Priory Federation.

Context

The academy opened in September 2010 in the accommodation of its two predecessor schools: The Central Technology Sports College and The Grantham Church High School. Most staff transferred to the academy, including the headmaster and deputy headmistress who were appointed to leadership roles in the predecessor schools just prior to their closure. There are plans for a new school building, due for completion in September 2013. Until then, the academy continues to operate across the two sites, two miles apart. The academy is one of four currently sponsored by The Priory Federation. Its specialist subjects are in the visual arts and in sport and health.

There are 1014 students on roll, the large majority of whom (72%) are boys. A small sixth form opened in September 2010, initially with just 11 students and currently with 75 on roll. A large majority of students are White British, and most speak English as their first language. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is below the national figure. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is above average.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

On entry to the academy, students' attainment is low. In its first year, the academy saw a sharp acceleration in students' achievement and a significant rise in standards; 49% of students achieved at least five A* to C grade GCSEs (including English and mathematics), a marked increase on the results achieved by either of the predecessor schools. The academy exceeded its challenging Key Stage 4 targets and narrowed the gap on the average attainment of students nationally. However, despite these impressive increases, which place the academy securely above the minimum floor standard, attainment remains significantly below national figures.

Improved rates of progress are evident in published data for the 2011 GCSE results, and also from observations of lessons, students' work and the academy's tracking information. However, this only brings the academy more broadly into line with the rates of progress expected, and senior leaders recognise that pockets of underachievement persist. Students with average or below-average starting points made better than expected progress in English and mathematics in 2011, but too many students with higher starting points did not make the progress expected between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. This is reflected in the significantly low proportion of higher-grade GCSEs achieved across most subjects.

The academy makes effective use of systematic assessment information to set ambitious targets, to monitor the progress of students and to guide suitable support and interventions. Tracking information indicates that it will match its 2011 results this year, even though the student cohort had lower starting points.

The embryonic sixth form is developing well. The academy offers a wide variety of courses, including a range of academic and vocational options which the students enjoy. Sixth-form students value the opportunity to continue their post-16 studies at the academy and speak highly of the provision, support and guidance that they receive. The academy's assessment information indicates that most sixth-form students are making progress at least in line with their capabilities.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching has improved significantly. The academy's evaluations of teaching indicate that a large majority of lessons are at least good and that

weaknesses have been identified and addressed. Positive relationships between adults and students are a strong feature of the academy. There is an excellent climate for learning in most lessons: students settle quickly, sustain their concentration and volunteer answers. Lessons have clear objectives and suitably ambitious outcomes for different groups, and teachers' exposition and modelling of work is often of a high quality. Many lessons strike the right balance between the teacher's input and independent learning. However, the level of students' engagement varies widely because teachers often spend too long directing proceedings from the front of the classroom rather than encouraging students to work out answers for themselves. The best lessons plan activities that allow students to collaborate, to exchange ideas and refine their thinking prior to plenary discussions. In a Year 10 history lesson, the well-devised independent activities also gave the teacher more opportunity to circulate, support individuals and promote higher levels of debate that would not have emerged from a routine question-and-answer session.

Assessment and target setting are emerging strengths of teaching but the quality and impact of ongoing assessment in lessons and through marking vary widely. Teachers work hard on correction and marking but their guidance has too little impact, either because it is not specific to the subject or because students pay no heed to the advice given. The best questioning engages all students, skilfully probes their understanding and accelerates their learning. However, closed and untargeted questioning are features of the satisfactory lessons.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students and staff speak positively about the transformation in behaviour since the academy opened. Levels of fixed-term exclusion and referrals for behaviour were comparatively high during the first year as the academy sought to establish its expectations, but figures for the autumn term 2011 plunged dramatically. Rather than being a barrier to achievement, students' attitudes to learning are becoming a notable strength. Students show consideration for the welfare of others and understand how to stay safe. Their respectful and thoughtful behaviour is a strong feature of the academy. Around the academy, students move calmly, considerately and punctually without the need for bells. They respond positively to the excellent example set by adults. They take responsibility for their own conduct and behaviour in lessons; they comply with teachers' expectations and show respect for one another by listening patiently and contributing sensibly. Some students lack the confidence to volunteer answers and many, notably girls, are rather passive in lessons, particularly when teachers dominate proceedings. However, when given the opportunity to work collaboratively and exchange ideas, students respond with growing assurance and enthusiasm.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

Despite the challenge of merging staff and students from two different schools and managing the academy across two sites, the headmaster and senior leadership team have been conspicuously successful in establishing a positive climate for learning and a collegiate community. The headmaster maintains a high profile around the academy in order to model his expectations and ensure that high aspirations are shared with everyone.

The academy has successfully raised standards by addressing key areas of weakness and building on the changes introduced in the predecessor schools. All elements of provision have been strengthened, including teaching, the curriculum and systems for the support, care and guidance of students. Key priorities have been pinpointed so that changes could be implemented swiftly. Immediate changes to the curriculum, for example, meant that students were able to access higher levels of accreditation from their chosen courses. Meanwhile, amendments to the Key Stage 3 curriculum have strengthened provision across the academy and revisions to Key Stage 4 options enable students to select from a wider range of pathways to better suit their particular aptitudes and aspirations. Broadening the variety of extra-curricular activities has provided an excellent range of enrichment opportunities, beyond sport, that fuel students' higher aspiration and nurture their positive attitudes.

The stronger engagement of students is reflected in improved attendance and punctuality. Attendance, which was previously below average, rose to above the national figure in the autumn term 2011, with a concomitant reduction in the previously high levels of persistent absenteeism. There are rigorous systems for monitoring students' participation and engagement, based on the new house system which systematically oversees students' academic performance and supports their personal development and well-being. Students themselves are suitably involved and consulted on significant issues; they feel that the academy listens and responds to their views. In addition, the academy has taken steps to strengthen the engagement of parents and carers so that they are better able to support their children.

The academy has implemented systematic procedures for monitoring its performance to guide development planning and further improvement. Self-evaluation is sound, although rapid improvements in the quality of teaching and students' achievement have engendered some over-generous judgements. Nonetheless, the academy is rightly proud of the improvements brought about in the first 18 months and the positive impact of these changes on students. Senior leaders know where pockets of underperformance persist and understand the considerable work that remains in order to address the legacy of low aspirations and underachievement.

The academy has transformed the attitudes and expectations of most students and strengthened all outcomes. The governing body, through its local committee and overarching board, is suitably well informed about the academy's performance and progress, and provides support and challenge. Although the process of transformation was initiated in the two predecessor schools prior to their closure, the impact of the changes brought about in the academy's first 18 months demonstrates its strong capacity for improvement.

External support

The academy requires relatively little external support. It is able to buy in specialist consultant support from the local authority and draw on the resources, experience and expertise of its partners in the Priory Federation. The additional burden of planning new building developments, for example, has been helpfully lifted.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Accelerate the progress that students make in lessons so that any gaps in achievement are minimised by:
 - more frequently planning activities that promote the participation and active engagement of all students in the group
 - encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning and progress.

- Maximise the impact of formative assessment by ensuring that:
 - marking is more sharply focused on what students have done successfully and specifically what they need to improve
 - students respond to the guidance given.

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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Terry Coffey Chair of the Governing Body
The Academies Advisers Unit, DfE [colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk]