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Mr Andrew Taylor-Edwards
Principal
The Winsford E-ACT Academy
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CW7 2BT

Dear Mr Taylor-Edwards

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Winsford E-ACT Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with John Peckham, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 25 January to 26 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, scrutinised documents and met with members of the senior leadership team, groups of pupils, and a representative of the sponsors. A telephone discussion was held with the Chair of the Governing Body. Inspectors scrutinised a range of documentation, including that relating to the achievement of students, attendance and the quality of teaching. Sixteen lessons were observed with 16 teachers observed.

Context

The academy opened in September 2010. It replaced the former Verdin High and Woodford Lodge Schools, both of which were operating in challenging circumstances. For the first year of its existence the academy operated on the two

predecessor school sites. It is now based at the Grange Lane site. The Principal has been in post since April 2011.

The academy has specialisms in mathematics and music. There are over 1100 students on roll with 50 in Year 12. A higher than average proportion of students is known to be eligible for free school meals. The proportion of students with special educational needs and those with disabilities is smaller than average. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds or whose first language is not English is lower than that found nationally.

Pupils' achievement

The achievement of students is improving as demonstrated by the first set of national examination results received by the academy in 2011. These represented a rise on those attained by the predecessor schools in recent years. The 43% attaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, for example, is a significant improvement on the 27% attained by Woodford Lodge in 2010. The signs that this figure will be improved on in 2012 are promising. Already, owing to early entry, the figure stands at 26%. This improvement in attainment is welcome and has ensured floor targets in 2011 were exceeded.

Leaders, however, are not complacent. They recognise all too clearly that the progress made by students remains below national expectations in English and mathematics. Nevertheless, such is the determination of senior leaders, the academy is identifying well where concerns about achievement remain and acting quickly to address these. There are signs that the actions taken to improve the progress students are making are working. Expectations of what students are capable of doing are higher, as demonstrated by the challenging but realistic target that 50% will attain five or more GCSEs graded at A* to C, including English and mathematics. However, expectations are not broken down into activities for different ability groups in day-to-day lessons in a consistent way. A further sign of improvement is evident in students' work in their books and lessons. Over time, more and more students are making at least satisfactory progress in their learning, although this is sometimes hindered by work not being completed.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Inspectors share the confidence expressed by students that behaviour has improved. Students recognise and appreciate the efforts of senior leaders in securing these improvements and demanding consistency across the academy, in ensuring the correct uniform and discouraging the use of mobile phones, for example. Many students were seen to be polite and well-mannered in and around the academy's precincts. Behaviour in nearly all lessons observed was at least satisfactory. However, on a very few occasions, it was not good enough and despite being managed appropriately, disrupted learning. On other occasions, and evident in

students' written work, because the pace of lessons is not always strong enough, students are passive and do not take responsibility for their learning.

Two further key improvements brought about by the determination of senior leaders which are having a positive impact, not least in the achievement of students, have been in terms of punctuality and attendance. At this large site the great majority of pupils arrive at lessons on time which ensures there are opportunities to begin learning quickly. Overall attendance rates have improved too. Already this year attendance stands at 93.2%, up from the 2010/11 figure of 89.8%.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching observed during this monitoring inspection ranged from satisfactory to good in the main and outstanding in one lesson. This, coupled with the work of students in their books, suggests the overall quality is improving with little that is less than satisfactory. Nevertheless, despite this welcome improvement, such quality is not sufficiently strong enough to move the overall attainment of students to at least broadly average levels, particularly given the weak starting points of students which are often hindered by poor literacy skills. This is understood clearly by the Principal and his senior leaders. Also understood through their regular and rigorous monitoring of teaching and learning quality are the features of good and better lessons and the features of those not yet at this standard. Such knowledge is most beneficial as it is allowing senior leaders to target subjects, such as mathematics, to bring about improvements and also to put into place a series of interventions to enhance the learning of students.

Observations of teaching and learning, coupled with scrutiny of students' work over time, conducted both by inspectors and senior leaders, highlight a number of key features about lessons where the teaching is good or better. In these lessons students often make better than expected progress. This is because teachers have high and clear expectations of what students are to do and to learn. As a result, during these lessons, activities, questions and prompts are suitably shaped to focus well on the different ability groups and move students on to the next level. In these lessons students are involved in their own learning and, because they have clear criteria to work to, they are able to assess the quality of their own progress and that of their peers accurately. Invariably, and because interest levels are high, behaviour is good and work is completed to at least the high standards expected at the onset of the lesson. In these better lessons the marking of students' work is clear and helpful in identifying strengths and what must be done to improve. Features of such quality, though, are not consistent throughout the academy and still, too often, work is set on the basis of who finishes first rather than on levels of ability. In such situations it is not only the more able who are not challenged, it is most other groups too. In addition, and while evident in only a minority of students' work, too much work is unfinished, even though teachers may demand its completion.

The academy has reviewed its curriculum provision. Of particular interest to students in Years 7 to 9 are the 'Personal Best' sessions on Wednesday afternoons. These sessions, which are thoroughly enjoyed, involve the students participating in a wide range of activities such as combining the use of different body parts and objects to create rhythms to accompany singing in anticipation of a future public performance. In addition, the Key Stage 4 curriculum has been widened to allow courses to begin in Year 9 and, in the sixth form, the students appreciate the opportunities small group work presents to them to get to grips with their subjects. An important aspect of the revisions to the curriculum has been the introduction of regular intervention sessions which benefit all groups of students involved, particularly those in need of additional support, in literacy or mathematics, for example. Convincing evidence provided by the academy highlights students making rapid progress in their learning as a result of these sessions. However, where students are removed from their usual lessons regularly to participate in these interventions, their subject knowledge in the lessons they are missing sometimes dips.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Inspectors are of the view that the sense of optimism and growth was palpable during this monitoring inspection. The Principal, senior leaders and members of the governing body are setting the correct priorities. They are honest about what the academy has still to achieve, are robust in seeking improvements, and put actions into place in a timely fashion. Self-evaluation is accurate as demonstrated by the agreement between inspectors and senior leaders about the quality of lessons observed jointly. Senior leaders are positive role models with one, for example, teaching an outstanding lesson during this monitoring inspection. The academy's improvement plans are ambitious. They, for example, demand by 2013 that all teaching and learning are at least good and aim to develop the role of middle leaders so that they share responsibility with senior leaders in holding every member of staff to account for the performance of students. Such plans are essential to remove the legacy of underachievement and the inconsistency that still exists. Most importantly, senior leaders are seeing the impact of the actions they have taken, for example, in improvements to the achievement, behaviour and attendance of students. Consequently, while there is much to do, the Principal and his senior leaders are demonstrating good capacity to sustain improvement.

External support

The sponsor is providing the academy with robust, regular, and frequent support and challenge. This, coupled with equally robust input from senior representation from the local authority serving on the governing body's standards and curriculum committee, is a key factor in assisting the senior leaders in bringing about the improvements in the achievement, behaviour and attendance of students. The culture of no excuses because of the background of students is shared throughout the academy.

Main Judgements

Plans for the development of the academy are robust and challenging. The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise the quality of teaching and learning further so that more is good or better by ensuring:
 - students are as actively engaged in their learning as they are in the best lessons
 - students are actively involved in assessing their own progress and that of their peers against agreed criteria
 - activities to support the learning of students are more sharply focused on their levels of ability
 - the marking of students' work consistently identifies strengths and makes clear what they are to do to improve
 - unfinished work is completed.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Director of Children's Services for Chester and Cheshire West local authority, and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mark Williams
Her Majesty's Inspector