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27 January 2012

Mr J Gillard
The Principal
Aylward Academy
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Dear Mr Gillard

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Aylward Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Paul Scott, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 25 and 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, visiting 25 lessons and part lessons, where they focused on the standards of students' work. Inspectors also scrutinised documents and met with nominated staff, groups of students, parents and carers, the Chair of the Governing Body and two representatives from the Academies Enterprise Trust.

Context

The academy opened in 2010 on the site of its predecessor school, Gladys Aylward School. It is a member of the London Academies Enterprise Trust (LAET), which works in partnership with the London Development Agency (LDA) and the Academies Enterprise Trust (AET). In its first year, the academy experienced a significantly high staff turnover; at present, one fifth of its teaching staff are newly

qualified teachers or Teach First graduates. Despite a number of relatively new appointments in the senior and middle leadership team, there is now greater stability within the staffing profile.

There are 1,405 students on roll. The sixth form has increased its numbers of students to 193. A large majority of students are Turkish, with a smaller proportion of students from Black Somali, White British and Black Caribbean heritages. An increasing number of Eastern European students are joining the academy and the proportion of students for whom English is an additional language is very high. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is much higher than the national figure. The proportion of students who are disabled or have special educational needs is high and few have statements of special educational needs, the majority of whom have been identified as having behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

Achievement of pupils

On entry to the academy, student attainment is very low. Since 2010, owing to effectively targeted interventions, including additional subject support in English and mathematics, 48% of Year 11 students achieved at least five A* to C GCSE grades, including English and mathematics. This is a marked increase on the results achieved by the predecessor school. However, despite these impressive increases, which place the academy securely above the minimum floor standard, attainment remains well below national figures. The progress students make in their GCSE subjects against their starting points is good overall. Their progress in English, humanities and modern foreign languages is good, but in mathematics and science it is no better than satisfactory. Too many students with higher starting points make only satisfactory progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. This is reflected in the low proportion of higher grade GCSEs achieved across most subjects. Particular groups, such as White British, Black African, Black Caribbean and Eastern European students, do not make the progress expected of them, especially in mathematics and science. Senior leaders recognise that pockets of underachievement persist within subjects and for individual students. Consequently, rigorous systems for tracking and identifying students at risk of underachieving are used as the basis of effective support. This has resulted in current Year 11 and Year 10 students making better progress than in the previous year.

The majority of students are well motivated and enthusiastic learners; however, the variability in their learning experiences and achievement in lessons reflect the pattern of attainment across the subjects in Key Stages 4 and 5. Inspectors observed students in humanities, modern foreign languages and English more actively involved in their learning, because the learning objectives and activities were in line with their abilities and helped to consolidate their knowledge and skills. Clear assessment opportunities, for instance pupils' evaluation of others' work against success criteria, together with skilful and targeted questioning by teachers, enabled

students to reflect on their learning and to develop critical thinking skills. Standards of work reflected the good outcomes in these subjects. However, in mathematics and science, activities were not consistently in line with students' abilities and did not always challenge and extend more able students.

The sixth form has increased in numbers. Sixth-form students value the opportunity to continue their post-16 studies at the academy and speak highly of the provision and support that they receive. The numbers of students who are not in training, education or work following Year 11 have reduced significantly. The academy's assessment information indicates that most sixth-form students are making progress that is at least in line with their capabilities. Although the academy is expanding its vocational provision, the quality of course guidance and induction in Year 11, coupled with the limited choice of pathways, has not helped some sixth form students successfully complete their courses.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching has improved significantly. The academy's evaluations of teaching indicate that a majority of lessons are at least good and that weaknesses have been identified and addressed. In a number of lessons, there is a positive ethos for learning. Students settle quickly and where lessons have clear objectives and tasks in line with their abilities, they sustain their concentration and work purposefully. In humanities and modern foreign languages lessons, students clearly enjoyed using independent and collaborative learning skills and responded well to clearly structured activities and prompts. They could talk confidently and accurately about what they had learnt. However, the level of student engagement varies widely. In those lessons where teaching is only satisfactory, this is because students are not fully challenged in their learning. Moreover, the pace of learning is too slow with teachers focusing more on giving information than on developing genuine understanding.

Target setting is an emerging strength of teaching, but the quality and impact of ongoing assessment in lessons, through verbal and written feedback, vary widely. This means that, in some cases, students are vague about what they need to do to attain their targets. In the main, teachers' guidance has too little impact, either because it is not specific to the subject or because students do not redraft their work or implement the advice given.

Teachers are given data on their students' abilities, to help them set tasks and plan lessons, but there is too much inconsistency in the way this is done. Students who are disabled and those with special educational needs, in addition, those, who are at an early stage of learning English, are supported through more structured tasks out of lessons and make satisfactory progress. In lessons however, the support they receive is of more variable quality. Younger and older students value highly the popular 'drop n read' and accelerated reading programmes that help develop their

literacy skills. Inspectors observed some good opportunities in religious education, sociology and English lessons, in which students deepened their understanding of social, religious and cultural issues.

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 inappropriate behaviour have been dramatically reduced since April 2011. The vast majority of students report that they now feel safe in the academy and that incidents of bullying are dealt with effectively. The academy has worked successfully to overcome the disruptive and anti-social behaviour of students who are subject to external influences. Closer working between the academy's family liaison officer and Somali parents and carers has significantly reduced the incidents of violence amongst Somali girls. Rather than a barrier to achievement, the majority of students' attitudes to learning are now a strength. Most behave well in lessons, but if the activity is not sufficiently absorbing, a few lose attention and chatter.

Students show consideration for others and understand how to stay safe. The majority move considerately and punctually around the academy, although inspectors observed students who did not. Academy staff patrol corridors and ensure that students are kept on track and they, in turn, respond positively to the boundaries of good behaviour established by adults. They comply well with teachers' expectations, for instance in relation to the regulations on uniform. Levels of attendance have improved significantly and are now above the national average, whilst persistent absence has reduced significantly to be in line with the national average. However, the academy is aware that it needs to prioritise the lower attendance of sixth form students.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

Despite the challenges of very low student attainment, poor behaviour and high staff turnover, the Principal and senior leadership team have been successful in establishing a positive climate for learning and a diverse harmonious community. The Principal 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. The leadership team has rightly prioritised Key Stage 4 achievement, students' behaviour and greater stability in staffing. This has led to strengthening teaching, the leadership of curriculum and the areas of student care and support. The academy is now working towards strengthening curriculum leadership further through greater consistency in approaches and sharing of good teaching practice.

Immediate changes to the curriculum, for example, mean that students in Key Stage 4 follow pathways that better suit their particular aptitudes and aspirations and, in principle, they can access higher levels of accreditation from their chosen courses.

Academy data indicate that 8% of future GCSE grades achieved by the current Years 9 and 10 are predicted to be A*/A, indicating a significant rise in standards when they reach Year 11. However, inspectors found some instances where more able students were not following the appropriate levels of courses in English, mathematics and modern foreign languages. Students in Key Stage 3 have an increased number of lessons in the core subjects and their progress is more frequently monitored through teacher assessments.

Broadening the variety of extra-curricular activities has provided a good range of enrichment opportunities, especially in music and art, that shape students' positive attitudes. Students themselves feel that the academy listens and responds to their views.

The academy's systematic procedures for monitoring its performance have effectively guided senior and middle leaders in development planning and further improvement. Self-evaluation is highly effective and reflects a leadership team that knows its priorities for improvement. The academy generally has an accurate view of the quality of teaching, but internal observations in lessons do not focus sufficiently on students' acquisition of knowledge and skills.

The clarity of direction and very good partnership work with parents, carers and external agencies have combined well to shape the ethos of the academy and to ensure that all students have an equal chance to do well. The academy has transformed the attitudes and expectations of most students and strengthened outcomes. The newly-formed governing body, the regional director of AET and the overarching board are very well informed about the academy's performance and progress. They provide targeted resources, support and challenge. The governing body ensures that the academy fulfils its statutory obligations with regard to the safeguarding of the 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 impact of the changes brought about in the academy's first 16 months demonstrates its good capacity for improvement.

External support

The academy benefits from specialist consultant support in science in the absence of a substantive head of department and is able to buy in additional consultancy support, as and when the need arises. It can also draw on the resources, experience and expertise of its partners in the AET.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop greater consistency in teaching and assessment across subjects, ensuring that:
 - all teachers build on the good practice identified in humanities, modern foreign languages and English
 - information on students' abilities, knowledge and skills is used to plan more challenging lesson activities and tasks which extend their learning
 - the marking of students' work fully informs students about how to improve and how to achieve their targets
 - the monitoring of the quality of teaching looks closely at students' learning and progress.

- Improve retention and outcomes in Year 12 by:
 - appropriate curriculum pathways which cater for all abilities and needs
 - more rigorous monitoring of student attendance
 - more accurate guidance in Year 11 for students progressing to Year 12
 - structured induction and support for Year 11 students so that there is a good match between their knowledge and skills and the entry requirements for their chosen Year 12 courses.

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

Meena Kumari Wood
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
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