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Mrs Ruth Johnson
Principal
Sarum Academy
Westwood Road
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Wiltshire
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Dear Mrs Johnson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Sarum Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Ian Hancock, 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, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, senior and middle leaders, teachers, groups of students, the Chair of the Governing Body and a representative of the sponsors.

Context

Sarum Academy opened in September 2010. It is housed in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. A major new building programme is due to begin in March 2012 and is scheduled for completion in September 2013. The academy's main sponsor is the Church of England Salisbury Diocese, working in partnership with Bath Spa University, Bryanston School and Wiltshire local authority. The academy has subject specialisms in mathematics and the arts.

There are currently 625 students on roll, aged 11 to 18; 70 of these are in the sixth form. Most of the students are of White British origin and a small number speak English as an additional language. Sixteen per cent of students are known to be eligible for free school meals. Thirteen per cent of the students are supported by school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs, which is a higher proportion than that found nationally.

Almost all staff from the predecessor school transferred to the academy when it opened. However, during the last year, there has been a high turnover of staff at all levels. The senior team has been restructured and two new deputy principals were appointed in April 2011. Further changes have been made from September 2011 onwards with the addition of a Director of Learning Needs, a Director of Post-16 and a new Director of Finance. One deputy principal is currently on maternity leave and there are vacancies for an assistant principal and curriculum team leaders for science and for religious education. The academy is structured as five smaller learning communities or 'schools'; their individual identities are fostered but there are common approaches to raising achievement and the quality of provision.

Pupils' achievement

Students enter the academy with levels of attainment significantly below the national average. In 2011, GCSE attainment was slightly lower than that in the last year of the predecessor school. Nonetheless, results exceeded the national floor standards, with 37% of students obtaining five or more good grades, including English and mathematics. This figure remains below the national average and points to the underlying weaknesses in students' development of literacy and numeracy skills. Inspection evidence confirmed the inconsistent approach to the development of these skills by teachers and across subjects and key stages. Consequently, there were significant variations in attainment and progress between subjects and groups of students. Boys and the small number of students with special educational needs at the level of school action plus attained relatively low results. It is crucial that the academy closes such gaps in performance and secures consistently good achievement for all groups of students.

Weaknesses in sixth-form teaching and an inappropriate curriculum for too many students led to underperformance, particularly for Year 13 students, in 2011. The work of a new sixth-form leader has been instrumental in securing improved rates of progress and a curriculum that better meets students' needs and interests. The academy has made good progress in tackling historic weaknesses in the accuracy of assessment for BTEC qualifications. Consequently, the provision for vocational qualifications has improved significantly and is having a positive impact on students' attainment as pass rates are increasing. Results in GCSE science were particularly low and the academy has tackled this robustly. Regular and accurate tracking and assessment to inform learning, curriculum changes and strong support from Bath

Spa University have been integral in securing improvement. As a result, current attainment in science is on track to move more closely in line with the national average.

The quality of learning currently in the academy is at least satisfactory in the great majority of lessons, with considerable improvement being shown in English and science. The standards seen in lessons and students' books, results from early examination entry and the academy's latest analysis of current performance indicate that Year 11 students are on course to reach their challenging targets for five A* to C grades including English and mathematics. However, the improved teaching profile across the academy is not yet strong enough to eradicate previous underperformance fully. Academy leaders are rightly focused upon using the secure gains in teaching quality to accelerate students' progress across the curriculum.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' attendance rates have improved progressively to be higher than at this stage last year. The proportion of students that are persistently absent has also reduced. These improvements have happened because the academy's systems for monitoring absence are more rigorous and greater numbers of staff are available to respond promptly to concerns. Nevertheless, there is more to be done to ensure that attendance is in line with most schools and that all students arrive to lessons on time throughout the day.

Discussions with students during the monitoring inspection confirm that they feel safe in the academy. Students hold positive views on the support available, which accounts for their confidence when raising concerns with staff, such as the school pastoral managers. Most students recognise that behaviour has improved in the time since the academy opened, as a result of higher expectations and increasingly robust procedures for managing behaviour. Rewards and sanctions are being applied more systematically. The number of days lost as a result of exclusion has reduced markedly. In the lessons visited, the majority of students demonstrated positive attitudes towards learning and behaved appropriately. However, in too many lessons, the low-level disruption of a small minority of students causes them to miss important information and hinders their progress. Students generally conduct themselves appropriately when moving between lessons.

The effectiveness of provision

Senior leaders have made determined efforts to improve the quality of teaching. The monitoring of lessons is increasingly rigorous, providing teachers with clear and informative feedback. The academy has adopted a more consistent approach to planning lessons. As a result, teachers are becoming increasingly effective at meeting the needs of students of different abilities and improving the rate of progress. Disabled students and those with special educational needs are closely

monitored and effective new systems have been implemented to ensure that the academy has a reliable baseline from which future progress can be measured. The redeployment of teaching assistants has enabled disabled students and those with special educational needs to spend a greater amount of time within lessons and their achievement is rising.

The quality of teaching is improving and incidents of inadequate teaching have reduced significantly as teachers are held increasingly to account for the progress that students make. Nevertheless, teaching remains variable and a high proportion makes a contribution to students' learning that is no better than satisfactory. In such cases, learning activities are not specifically tailored to meet individual learning needs and therefore lack sufficient challenge to motivate students of all abilities. In the most successful lessons, the teachers' high expectations and crisp explanations set the lesson off at a brisk pace. They maintain good progress by incisive questions that require students to substantiate their answers. In these lessons, students are engaged, motivated and have a clear understanding of the learning objectives. For example, a Year 13 history lesson with a strong emphasis on discussion enabled students to demonstrate an excellent grasp of historical knowledge. Students pursued the line of enquiry enthusiastically, identifying evidence in the text and frequently returning to the original question. In too many lessons, the levels of expectation and support are not high enough for students to think for themselves and to develop and explain their ideas through discussion and/or more detailed and sophisticated written responses. Consequently, they make limited progress in their learning.

The learning environment is beginning to be utilised to support students in their work. For example, in many classrooms information about National Curriculum levels and how to reach them is prominently displayed and referred to during lessons. Students are increasingly aware of their target levels and have a growing understanding of how they are doing. The lack of students' work to exemplify progression between levels and the variability of marking in books are two reasons why students are not always sure of the steps they need to take to progress to the next level.

The curriculum is meeting students' needs more effectively. The current programmes have been changed in response to students' feedback and because older courses have come to an end. The academy's programme for developing personal, learning and thinking skills in Year 7 has been strengthened in response to ongoing evaluation. Nevertheless, the progression of important concepts is not planned for systematically or given sufficient attention within lessons. Increasingly, regular extended learning days are utilised to tailor learning towards specific groups. The academy's specialisms of mathematics and the arts are beginning to make a stronger contribution to raising achievement. However, actions to develop the arts are more established and lead to an increased take-up of places on BTEC programmes in fashion, photography and music.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Academy leaders, including governors, are determined to accelerate students' achievement and the overall effectiveness of the academy. A number of changes of personnel at senior and middle leadership level have led to significant restructuring. This has resulted in roles and responsibilities being clearly defined and understood and improved lines of accountability. Self-evaluation has been strengthened by the development of a wider academy leadership team which is beginning to establish itself as an effective vehicle to support emerging leadership and raise standards. Systems of accountability have been strengthened through the mini-school system together with the introduction of a robust tracking system to capture assessment information and monitor students' progress regularly. Consequently, academy leaders are better able to identify underachievement and target interventions specifically. For example, results from early entry examinations in mathematics are being used with internal monitoring data to create a series of tailored interventions which target key mathematical weaknesses in a systematic way.

Teachers talk positively about the greater rigour and levels of expectation and accountability that exist with regard to improving teaching and accelerating progress. Raising attainment plans are now being used more effectively and ensure that all discussions are grounded in more sophisticated data analysis to monitor progress and inform subsequent action. These systems appear to be working well and have given the academy a clear centrality of purpose. Nevertheless, academy leaders know, through their accurate appraisals of the quality of teaching, that too many lessons continue to secure only satisfactory rates of progress. Leadership at subject level is variable and some leaders are still at an early stage in being effective in leading improvement. Actions taken by middle leaders sometimes lack clarity and precision with regard to evaluating the impact they have had on students' outcomes.

The governing body has a good range of skills and experience and has been thorough in its work to manage staffing changes, improve financial management and in its preparation for the new building programme. Their confidence and expertise in evaluating the performance of the school in relation to national expectations, and in holding it to account, are growing. Governors have effective procedures in place to ensure students' safety, and current safeguarding requirements are met. Success in tackling areas of weakness, including the uneven quality of teaching, the curriculum, behaviour and attendance indicates that the academy has satisfactory capacity for improvement.

External support

The Principal has engaged external consultants to provide advice, support and guidance in a number of priority areas. This has helped secure improvements, for example in the overall quality of teaching, the work of individual subjects and the

development of a more effective system to track assessment data. Good partnership between the academy and the co-sponsors has enabled staff and expertise to be shared. This has had a positive impact on improving teaching and supporting weaker areas of the curriculum. Science students from the University of Bath Spa and mathematics teachers from Bryanston School are being used effectively to improve rates of progress, strengthen teaching and raise students' aspirations and self-esteem. Wiltshire local authority has played a strong role in securing the new build and developing its future project management.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment and achievement in all subjects by ensuring that there is a greater proportion of good or outstanding teaching by:
 - ensuring that teachers use assessment information consistently well when planning lessons so that learning activities are specifically tailored to meet the needs of students and provide appropriate challenge, regardless of students' ability or starting points
 - increasing levels of teachers' expectations and support so that students are better able to think for themselves and develop and explain their ideas through discussion and more detailed and sophisticated written responses
 - enabling students to understand precisely what their subject-specific actions for improvement mean and how to complete them.

- Improve the impact of leaders at all levels on raising achievement by:
 - increasing the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems to drive improvements more evenly and consistently across the curriculum
 - sharpening the way in which middle leaders track and measure students' progress and evaluating rigorously the impact of the actions that they are taking to improve students' outcomes.

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

Karl Sampson
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
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