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Mrs W Stevens
Interim Executive Principal
Harborne Academy
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Dear Mrs Stevens

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Harborne Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Trevor Riddiough, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 25 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, including 21 lesson observations, scrutinised documents and met with staff, groups of students and representatives of the governing body and sponsors.

Context

Harborne Academy opened in 2010 with the predecessor headteacher as Principal. It is sponsored by Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMC). An Interim Executive Principal started in September 2011 with an Associate Vice Principal who is at the academy until the end of the academic year and is part of the Future Leaders initiative. New directors of English and mathematics joined in January 2011. There are plans for a new school building due to be completed on 2013. The academy offers specialisms in health and science.

There are 511 students on roll. A small sixth form opened in September 2010, currently with 27 on roll. Students come from wide range of minority ethnic groups. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is well above the national figure. The proportion of disabled students or those with special educational needs is above average. A high proportion of students leave and join the school partway through their secondary education.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

On entry to the academy, student attainment is well below average. In its first year, the academy saw a modest increase in student achievement with an associated rise in standards. At 38 per cent, the proportion of students attaining five GCSE A* to C grades including English and mathematics was 3 per cent higher than the results achieved by the predecessor school. However, 93 per cent students gained five A* to C GCSE grades, which is a marked improvement on the previous year and is due largely to the success of applied subjects taken. The academy met or exceeded its challenging Key Stage 4 targets, except in mathematics which fell well short. Despite these increases, which place the academy just above the minimum floor standard set by the government, attainment remains significantly below national figures on most measures.

Improved rates of progress are evident in the GCSE results for 2011 in some subjects, and also from observations of lessons, students' work and the academy's tracking information. This brings the academy more broadly into line with the rates of progress expected. These improvements are largely the result of interventions to enable those who are behind with their work to catch up. Most of these happen outside of lessons, such as during catch-up sessions at lunchtime or mentoring after school. Teaching in day-to-day lessons does not have the same impact because it does not always focus on accelerating rates of progress for students who are falling behind or struggling with their work. Senior leaders recognise that pockets of underachievement persist, particularly in mathematics and, more generally, for boys. Students with above-average starting points made less than expected progress in mathematics and science in 2011. This is reflected in the significantly low proportion of higher grade GCSEs achieved across these subjects.

Student groups, such as those known to be eligible for free school meals, make the same progress as their peers. However, students learning English as an additional language make less than expected progress in English. The academy is addressing this issue through the provision of a strong foundation course for these students.

The academy makes effective use of assessment information to set ambitious targets, to monitor the progress of students and to guide suitable support and interventions. Detailed and robust tracking information indicates that it expects to

match or just exceed its 2011 results this year, even though the student cohort had lower starting points.

The emergent sixth form is developing well. The academy offers a small number of foundation and GCSE courses, including a vocational option which the students enjoy. Sixth-form students value the opportunity to continue their post-16 studies at the academy and are positive about 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.

Students' development of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum varies and is not consistently applied. However, in a science lesson, students responded well to a hot seating activity to develop and test their understanding of key science words linked to explaining night and day. The teacher picked up on any misconceptions and corrected the students' understanding. Not all teachers regularly identify common spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors in students' work and support them to make corrections.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching varies across the academy, with too much that is no better than satisfactory. Eight lessons were observed jointly with senior managers. Their evaluations were accurate but previous judgements have been generous. There are notable strengths and some examples of good practice. The most successful lessons sustain a good pace with a sharp focus that engages all the students and a range of engaging activities capture students' interest. For example, in an English lesson, students were encouraged to think creatively by visualising a surreal picture. They then set their own targets and worked independently on a writing task with appropriate support materials for those who would find the work challenging. A good mathematics lesson ensured that students were set different questions based on their prior attainment. They acted as coaches, correcting student answers, and the teacher skilfully used questioning to probe their understanding and accelerate their learning. However, closed and untargeted questioning are features of the satisfactory lessons. The most common limitations are in planning, when the intended learning outcomes lack challenge because the teacher's use of assessment does not take full account of students' prior learning. The work is sometimes too easy or too hard. Teaching assistants are not always deployed effectively to maximise the support available to help students learn and their roles are not clearly defined. Positive relationships between adults and students are a strong feature of the academy but the length of lessons limits the learning of students. Teachers work hard on 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.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students respond well to the expectations for behaviour that have been set within the academy. They appreciate and contribute to the orderly and caring community and show respect for the inclusive ethos of the school. This is supported by the newly introduced mixed-year tutor groups which are promoting positive relationships amongst students. Disabled students and those with special educational needs participate and achieve because of this and the good support that they receive. All students are supported well to develop the personal and basic skills that they need to succeed. Students behave well outside of lessons, at break-times and at lunchtime. In lessons, students sometimes become restless and disengage from their work, particularly if it is too hard or too easy. Fixed-term exclusions have fallen in the current year, showing that behaviour has improved. This is because leaders are tracking incidents of poor behaviour, developing a picture of this helps tackle it with a range of rewards and sanctions. Sanctions are allied closely to rehabilitation which helps to integrate and re-engage students with mainstream activities. This is managed well and there are clear procedures which staff and students follow.

Students say that they feel safe and most are confident that any serious concerns will be dealt with swiftly. For example, students said there were very few incidents of bullying and they knew who to turn to if they were in any way concerned. Attendance has risen and is now above average. There has also been a significant decrease in the proportion of students who take a large amount of time off school. This is due to careful targeting of resources and the provision of appropriate support to their families.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

Senior leaders have been successful in bringing improvements in achievement, behaviour and attendance. Systems to monitor and track students' progress have been strengthened very considerably. However, the monitoring and evaluation is not systematic and rigorous enough to pick up all of the issues around the quality of teaching and marking in books and so to improve practice. Even where areas of weakness are being picked up they do not lead to fast enough actions in order to make improvements. Professional development activities to improve the quality of teaching have not had sufficient impact. The effectiveness and roles of middle managers is too variable and they are not sufficiently involved in driving up the quality of teaching. The academy recognises the need to identify and share the most effective practice more widely to improve teaching further.

The governing body is well organised and regularly reviews the academy's progress against key indicators such as attainment. Members of the governing body are very knowledgeable about the academy. Consequently are in a strong position to provide suitable challenge. The academy has demonstrated that it has a capacity to sustain and extend the improvements made and to strengthen the outcomes for students.

The curriculum is broad and balanced. Revisions to Key Stage 4 options enable students to select from a wider range of pathways to better suit their particular aptitudes and aspirations. The three-year Key Stage 4 curriculum allows students an

early start to GCSE and vocational courses. The health and science specialism is starting to bring many benefits to students and is enhancing the curriculum. For example, events and courses run by external health professionals are making good use of the 'Health Tech' centre. Reasonable actions are taken to promote students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. These aspects of learning are not embedded in subjects but are encouraged through assemblies, tutor-time and a variety of enrichment opportunities which broaden students' experience.

External support

The academy has found the support of the sponsor particularly useful in challenging it to make the necessary improvements. The academy buys in specialist consultants and draws on the resources, experience and expertise of its sponsor, in addition to its partnerships within the Oaks Collegiate.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment in all subjects, and especially in English and mathematics.
- Raising the quality of teaching so that 70 per cent is good or better by December 2012 by:
 - ensuring teachers use assessment information to plan learning activities in all lessons that meet the needs of all students
 - reviewing progress with students systematically through oral feedback during the lesson, and in their marking, so that students clearly understand what to do to improve their work
 - developing the use of probing questions to give more opportunities for students to participate actively, develop their ideas fully, and to drive learning forward.
- Develop the capacity of leaders, especially those with responsibility for subjects by:
 - increasing the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems to drive improvements in teaching more evenly and consistently across the curriculum
 - modelling, coaching and mentoring to promote good practice in teaching throughout the academy
 - ensuring that the progress of students in the sixth form is tracked, monitored and acted upon with the same rigour as in the main school.

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

Davinder Dosanjh
Her Majesty's Inspector