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Mr M Trusson
Principal
Taunton Academy
Chedon Road
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TA2 7QP

3rd February 2012

Dear Mr Trusson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Taunton Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Robert Barbour, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 1 and 2 February 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 students, staff, a representative of the governing body and an external consultant.

Context

The academy came into existence in September 2010 following the merger of two local schools. The academy is based in the buildings that previously housed the St Augustine of Canterbury and Ladymead Community Schools. The former of these schools attained results that did not meet the government's floor standards in 2009 and 2010. The latter school did not meet these standards in 2009. Two vice principals joined the school from outside the area but other senior leaders are from the former schools. There has been relatively little change in staffing or in the make-up of the students attending the academy. A sixth form was established in September 2011. This provision is designed to complement what is already available locally. The academy is sponsored by the Diocese of Bath and Wells and Somerset County Council.

Achievement of students at the academy

When the academy opened in September 2010, students' attainment was low. The academy, in a very short time, raised the attainment of students, particularly those that were in the middle of the ability range. As a result, the academy's results rose with significantly more students attaining five A* to C GCSE grades, including English and mathematics. In 2011, the academy comfortably met the government's floor standard, which is the minimum expectation for students' attainment and progress. Although these results were a noteworthy improvement on the performance of the predecessor schools there were still major shortcomings in students' progress given their attainment on leaving their primary schools. Sizeable gaps exist in the achievement of a number of groups. The achievement of boys is below that of the girls and well below that of this group nationally. Similar gaps exist for students known to be eligible for free school meals and for some groups of students with disabilities or special educational needs and who receive external support.

Current evidence suggests further improvement with signs that these gaps are slowly beginning to close. Special educational needs are being more accurately identified and an increasingly well-organised inclusion centre is providing effective support, particularly for those identified as having social, emotional and behavioural needs. A well-established additional programme is enhancing the reading ages of a minority of students with reading difficulties. Elsewhere the increase in students' progress is strongly associated with improvements to the curriculum. The rate of progress made by Year 9 students has been substantially increased because of the greater rigour associated with commencing GCSE courses a year earlier.

In lessons, inspectors found a mixed picture. A minority of older students undertaking vocational subjects were observed to be making good progress because these courses were well matched to their needs. Good and outstanding progress was observed in quite a wide range of subjects. However, improved student progress was less evident in the key subjects of English and mathematics, and especially in science. Although it is early days for the sixth form as current student numbers are low, there are promising signs that the post-16 curriculum enhances the progress made by students, many of whom would not have continued in education had this provision not existed.

The quality of teaching

Despite recent improvements that have successfully raised some aspects of the students' achievement, the progress made in developing teaching in the subjects of English and mathematics has been more limited. Although there is some good and outstanding teaching, examples were also observed of teaching that was inadequate or barely satisfactory. The academy ensures that all lessons have clearly identified outcomes. In the better lessons, it is made clear how these outcomes link to

students' individual targets. In an outstanding travel and tourism lesson, students were observed to be attaining at a very high level because they focused strongly on the most challenging target and were highly motivated by a scenario that evoked life in a real travel agency. More confident teachers encourage independent learning, for instance by involving students in determining the success criteria that can be used to assess how they are to progress and by agreeing challenging timed targets. In an outstanding history lesson on the Cuban missile crisis students worked especially hard because they recognised that they were responsible for a particular aspect of this investigation.

There are strengths in teachers' questioning. Many resist the temptation to rely on willing volunteers and adopt strategies to ensure all students have to think about responses. An effective approach, for example, was observed in an English lesson which involved comparing the characters in 'Of Mice and Men'. Students' communication skills were enhanced by an activity which required all students to make their views clear to the rest of the class without the direct involvement of the teacher. This effective practice was in marked contrast to other lessons where the pace of learning was too slow. Occasional examples were seen of teachers not challenging students sufficiently well because the work is not at a high enough level or too much time is allocated to activities. This situation is not helped because some students, particularly the more able, do not have sufficiently challenging individual targets.

In the more effective lessons, teachers pause the lesson to clarify the challenging outcomes that are required, often referring to work already emerging from the other students. In other lessons, reviews of learning are relatively superficial and involve little more than students indicating how confident they feel about a concept being taught. This variability extends to marking. Although some marking is effective, examples were also seen of marking that does not help students appreciate what they must do to attain at the next National Curriculum level.

Overall, the academy satisfactorily promotes students' spiritual, social, moral and cultural development. There are strengths in terms of students' spiritual development. Students enjoy the varied curriculum they experience and strong links with the church ensure students have regular opportunities to reflect on the significance of their experiences in school. Students consider different faiths in this country and the global dimension is promoted. However, they are not as well prepared for life in an ethnically diverse United Kingdom.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students were observed to be mostly well behaved and considerate around the academy. Nevertheless, inspectors observed a few examples of less than perfect behaviour in lessons and there was some evidence that not all staff adhere to the academy's behaviour management policy. However, students reported that

behaviour has improved and that disruption in lessons is rare. Most students respond well to the academy's clear expectations as regards behaviour. Students also indicated that incidents of bullying are rare, although they indicated that there was some variability in how well this was resolved by different college leaders. Students reported that they thought that there are more channels than previously through which they can communicate any concerns. The existence of older students acting as peer mentors makes them feel safe.

Effective steps are being taken to improve attendance, including an established focus on reducing any gaps between different groups. As a result, attendance has improved so that it is now average overall and the gaps between different groups of students are reducing. Improvements made to the management of the behaviour of the small minority that have difficulties in this area have reduced exclusions and are helping prevent any problems arising. Students were observed adopting safe practices in science and design and technology lessons.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The academy's leaders have made important improvements to the curriculum and a good start has been made in developing post-16 provision. The challenging task of creating a unified staff from two separate institutions is being well managed. Although there remains much to do, a reasonable start has been made in improving teaching. The academy's monitoring has enabled it to identify the strengths and weaknesses in teaching. Some underperformance has been challenged and there are signs that the coaching programme is beginning to result in weaker teachers receiving support from the academy's best practitioners.

There are strengths in the academy's self-evaluation in that it is largely accurate, succinct and draws upon an appropriate range of evidence. This includes the views of students, parents and carers and some consideration of the impact of provision on different groups. The academy is beginning to use data related to students' progress more effectively to promote equal opportunities. This is reflected in the stronger focus on closing the wide gaps that exist in the achievement of different groups. Senior leaders have ensured that teachers have the evidence about the performance of different groups and monitoring is being used to ensure effective responses to this. The conclusions reached on the effectiveness of teaching are a little overoptimistic but development plans indicate that the academy is aware of the important weaknesses that need to be addressed. For instance, the academy has identified that improvements are needed in the processes for setting targets in order to further raise expectations.

Although the pace of improvement in the key subjects was observed to be slower, the evidence of improvement elsewhere suggests that the academy is building its capacity for improvement. Crucial to this is that leaders, including the governing body, have recognised the need to accelerate the rate at which teaching is improving.

External support

The influence of the diocese is evident in the strong emphasis given to the pastoral care of students in the academy. The academy is working well with its council partners to ensure highly effective coordinated care for students whose circumstances make them potentially vulnerable. The academy also praised the support it has received for subject leaders from the Specialist School's Trust. The support provided by an external consultant has been important in enabling the academy to develop its coaching programme aimed at reducing the weaknesses in teaching.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress since opening.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure all targets for students are appropriately challenging and subject to regular review.
- Improve teaching by eradicating any that is inadequate and by ensuring all lessons are clearly linked to students' challenging targets.

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

Kevin Sheldrick

Her Majesty's Inspector