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9 February 2012

Mr Andy Stanier
The Principal
The Co-operative Academy at Brownhills
Brownhills Road
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Dear Mr Stanier

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Co-Operative Academy at Brownhills

Introduction

Following my visit with Davinder Dosanjh, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 7 and 8 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 visit was a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, including 20 lesson observations of which 12 were joint observations with members of the senior leadership team. They also carried out brief visits to a series of other lessons, sat in on two tutor groups, scrutinised documents and met with staff, groups of students and representatives of the governing body and sponsors.

Context

The academy opened in September 2010, in the accommodation of its predecessor school. The Principal was the headteacher of the predecessor school and was appointed to the academy six months prior to its opening. The main sponsor is the Co-operative Group, with co-sponsors Staffordshire University and Stoke-on-Trent College of Further Education. The academy is in a building programme which will deliver a new building opening in September 2012 and outdoor and sports facilities to be completed by September 2013. Faculties were established as part of the academy. All heads of faculty were new to the role in 2010. The academy's specialisms are mathematics and computing which were the specialisms in the predecessor school, with business and enterprise added when the academy opened.

January 2012



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

There are 637 students on roll. Students come from a wide range of minority ethnic groups. Around half of the student population speak English as an additional language and many are at the early stages of learning English. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is over double the national average as is the proportion of disabled students and those with special educational needs.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

On entry to the academy, student attainment is well-below average. While the academy saw a modest increase in student attainment in its first year, overall progress levels remained static at broadly average. However, in English and mathematics they dropped to below average. In 2011 39% of students achieved at least five A* to C grade GCSEs including English and mathematics, which is seven percent higher than the results achieved by the predecessor school. At 72%, the proportion of students who gained five A* to C grade GCSEs was a marked improvement on the previous year, due largely to their success in vocational subjects. The academy met its challenging Key Stage 4 targets at the key threshold measures of five A* to C grades and five A* to C grades including English and mathematics. However, targets for English and mathematics individually fell short. Despite some modest increases, which place the academy just above the minimum floor standard, attainment remains significantly below national figures in most measures.

Improved rates of progress are evident in the tracking data for 2012. However, these rates of improvement are not yet strong enough to bring the academy into line with the national averages. The improvements to date are largely the result of the interventions that the academy has introduced to enable those who are behind with their work to catch up. Tracking systems are in place which give regular information regarding students' progress, providing the basis for remedial action. Some of this happens 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, and especially those of higher ability. Senior leaders recognise that pockets of underachievement persist, particularly in core subjects and more generally in key groups such as those students who speak English as an additional language, and students with disabilities and special educational needs. This is reflected in the significantly low proportion of higher grade GCSEs achieved. However, these gaps in attainment are narrowing.

Over 80% of students enter the academy with a reading age below their chronological age. Monitoring of reading ages at Key Stage 3 became established in 2010 coupled with a literacy strategy. The academy's data show that most students are making improved progress in terms of reading ages. While students' speaking and reading levels are improving significantly, their writing skills are less developed.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching has improved since the academy opened. There are notable strengths and some examples of good practice. The quality of teaching varies across the academy and too much is satisfactory. The good lessons sustain a good pace that engages all the students and teachers ensure their different needs are met. Positive relationships between adults and students are strong features. Students work independently and take responsibility for their learning. A range of engaging activities captures students' interest and there is good use of electronic whiteboards. In a good English lesson, students were given different poems to analyse and were provided with prompt sheets and clear assessment criteria. Students' assessment of their own and others' work at the end of the lesson enabled them to share a critique of their analysis. This clearly showed what students had learnt in the lesson. In the less effective lessons the most frequent limitations are in planning, because some teachers do not use assessment data effectively to ensure that the lesson is pitched at the right level of difficulty. Lessons have a whole-class focus so students do the same work and there is not enough challenge. Teachers do most of the work in lessons and there is not enough time for students to spend on activities to help them learn. Plenaries are often rushed and not always effective in reviewing learning. Questioning does not challenge and probe students' thinking regularly through opportunities to explain their ideas. There is little opportunity for students to extend their answers. While most teachers mark regularly, the marking of students' work varies in quality. Often, teachers' marking and guidance have too little impact and students do not follow up advice. Cross-curricular emphasis on literacy and numeracy is not used consistently to boost students' skills in these areas. Not all teachers regularly identify common spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors in students' work and support them to make corrections.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Clear expectations for behaviour have been set in lessons and around the academy. The response of students to these expectations has been positive. However, in some lessons, students sometimes become restless and disengage from their work, particularly if it is too hard or too easy. Students were keen to point out that behaviour has improved noticeably since the academy opened. The focus on key strategies has been critical to this change. These strategies include the introduction of tutor-time geared to promote community awareness, the establishment of students as coaches in the community as well as enlisting the active support of students in the promotion of a positive learning climate. These have all produced a more cooperative attitude within the academy, which in turn has had a positive influence on behaviour. Further evidence of improved behaviour is the reduction in the number of exclusions and class referrals. Policies are in place to deal with bullying and poor behaviour which are clear to parents, students and staff so that when incidents do occur they are dealt with quickly. As a result of these well-managed arrangements, the academy is a cohesive and ordered community and the majority of students and parents feel that the academy is a safe place.

Attendance has risen and is now above average. As a result of determined and well-constructed strategies involving parents and carers and other agencies, there has been a significant decrease in the number of students who are persistently absent. There is a

strong inclusive ethos and the inclusion team is very successful at engaging all students, particularly disabled students and those with special educational needs, enabling them to play a full part in the life of the academy.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The academy is led effectively by the Principal and senior leaders. They set a clear direction focused on raising students' achievement and improving their personal development. Much has been achieved in the academy's first year. The academy's self-evaluation is well-thought through and the Principal and senior leaders have embedded ambition and drive forward improvements. There are sound systems in place to develop the role of middle managers and the monitoring of their departments. The faculty handbooks provide a very useful and systematic overview of the work of the departments with appropriate subject self-evaluation and development planning. Procedures for monitoring the academy's work and the progress of students are based on detailed analysis of data. The academy has demonstrated that it has a capacity to sustain and extend the improvements made and to strengthen the outcomes for students.

Improvements have been achieved by a thoughtful mix of regular evaluation of lessons and through personal coaching and training sessions. However, there is insufficient focus on what all students have learnt in the lessons in the monitoring and evaluation undertaken by leaders and managers in order to accelerate progress day-by-day.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and meets the students' needs through regular review. At Key Stage 3 there is a strong focus on developing students' low levels of literacy skills by additional support. This is leading to improvements in reading. The literacy strategy has started to focus on improving writing across the curriculum but is still in its early stages. The Key Stage 4 curriculum offers a mixture of traditional GCSE courses and a range of vocational courses. For those students whose circumstances make them potentially vulnerable there is an appropriate alternative curriculum based on work-based skills. The academy's co-operative ethos and principles have enabled students to take part in the Co-operative Young Leaders programme. Students have developed leadership qualities by going out to local primary schools to work with and support primary school pupils in a range of subject areas; for example by undertaking conservation lessons in different languages. 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 wide variety of enrichment opportunities which broaden students' experience.

External support

The academy has found the support of the sponsors particularly useful in challenging it to make the necessary improvements as well as in providing support to coordinate the

extensive building programme. The Co-operative Group has provided a critical external viewpoint and provided access to additional resources to support curriculum developments. Staffordshire University has provided higher education links and supported the raising

achievement programme. The Future Leaders Programme has been used to develop senior and middle leaders with bespoke training programmes involving 12 staff. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has provided valuable support to the Principal through its induction programme.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue to raise achievement in all subjects, particularly in English and mathematics, by ensuring that:
 - consistently high expectations are set for students of different abilities
 - assessment information is used consistently to plan teaching which meets the needs of different groups of students in the class
 - students with low literacy skills in writing have their learning needs quickly identified and then effective support and strategies planned and delivered appropriately across all lessons.
- Ensure that students experience good or better teaching in most lessons by:
 - planning lessons which provide students with relevant activities that promote their engagement and independence
 - providing consistently clear advice and guidance to students, which students then act on, through the day-to-day marking of their work to accelerate their progress.
- Ensure when lessons are being monitored that there is sufficient focus on what students have learnt.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of Governors and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mr Trevor Riddiough
Her Majesty's Inspector