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Mr J Reilly
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Reilly

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Gloucester Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Peter Limm, Her Majesty's Inspector to your academy on 22 and 23 March 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, visited 25 lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the headteacher, members of staff, groups of students and the Chair of the Governing Body, who is also a representative of one of the sponsors.

Context

Gloucester Academy was created in September 2010 following the closure of Central Technology College and Bishop's College. It operated for its first year across the two sites of the predecessor schools and was consolidated on the former Central College site in September 2011. A new building is expected to be completed for admissions in September 2013 and will support the launch of the academy's digital media and vocational education specialism, the implementation of schools of transition and achievement and joint post-16 provision with Gloucestershire College.

The sponsors, Prospects and Gloucestershire College, took over the running of the academy in September 2010. They secured the additional capacity of the Academies Enterprise Trust, an established academy sponsor, to assist with day-to-day

management of the academy during the first year. Prior to September 2011, when the current headteacher took up post, there were several changes of headteacher and of leadership personnel. Changes to both senior and middle leadership structures and roles are ongoing. Heads of English and mathematics have been appointed but are not yet in post.

Gloucester Academy is a smaller-than-average school with 785 students on roll, about three quarters of them boys. About two thirds are White British; one third are from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds. A higher-than-average proportion of students speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is more than double the national average. Almost 20% of students are disabled or have special educational needs and are at the school action stage of support; a further 8% are supported at the school action plus stage or through a statement of special educational needs. An increasing proportion of students enter or leave the school at times other than the conventional ones, including about 15% of the 2011 GCSE cohort.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

Students enter the academy with attainment that is significantly below the national average. GCSE attainment at the end of the academy's first year improved in comparison to the combined results of the predecessor schools. However, it remained significantly below average and did not meet the government floor standard. Too many students are making inadequate progress from their starting points. This is especially the case in mathematics for students of all levels of ability. Progress is better overall in English but still below national expectations, particularly for middle ability students.

Predictions for GCSE outcomes in 2012 indicate further improvement but assessment and tracking data show that progress in mathematics is still too slow. The gaps between the achievement of groups of students in the academy and the achievement of groups nationally are showing signs of closing, but not quickly enough. Academy leaders have correctly identified girls' overall achievement as a particular area of concern, as well as that of students who are disabled or have special educational needs and are at the school action plus stage of support. They also acknowledge that the achievement of most groups is well below expectations in mathematics. However, this awareness and analysis of underachievement are not yet informing teachers' planning well enough. As a result, activities in lessons are not well matched to students' abilities and needs and this limits their progress and the pace of learning.

The academy has rightly identified the development of basic literacy skills as a priority. This is addressed confidently and skilfully by some teachers, for instance in a mathematics lesson, where multiple examples of the use of the prefix 'quad' supported students' understanding of quadrilaterals. However, the impact of literacy

intervention programmes and of literacy development across the curriculum is too variable.

Intervention to drive up attainment in Years 10 and 11 is having a positive impact on GCSE outcomes. Students are appreciative of classes that are focused on helping them achieve their target grades. For example, Year 11 English students used grade criteria effectively to develop their writing. Careful teaching enabled them to identify key areas for improvement with precision and accuracy. They made good progress as a result. This focused and well-targeted teaching is too rare, however. In the weaker lessons, students lose focus because teachers lack the necessary skills and strategies to plan for and secure students' good progress. Disruptive behaviour inhibits learning in some lessons, especially where students lack the basic literacy necessary to tackle the work set.

The quality of teaching

Although some good or better teaching was seen during the inspection, too much was satisfactory or inadequate. In the best lessons, students behave well and enjoy learning because activities are well planned. Everyone has an opportunity to succeed because the tasks and materials have been adapted to ensure progress for all. For example, students worked exceptionally well in an art lesson because the teacher and other adults monitored their progress carefully, modelling techniques and challenging ideas throughout.

Students say that since the academy started there has been a greater emphasis on targets and how to achieve them. There is evidence of this initiative supporting achievement, for example in groups in which students' attainment is on the borderline between GCSE grades. Where marking is regular and detailed, it also helps students understand how to track their own progress and improve their work. However, this is not widespread or consistent. Too often, students' books are poorly presented and show limited productivity or progress. Limitations in basic literacy skills are evident and show little sign of concerted improvement.

Classroom organisation and behaviour management are inconsistent. Teachers' expectations of behaviour are sometimes too low and lessons are not planned to establish and elicit good learning habits. Teachers have variable success in eradicating incidents when students call out or engage in disruptive chatter. Systems for the positive management of behaviour, such as 'ASPIRE', are beginning to have an impact but are very recently established and inconsistently implemented. Warnings and sanctions are used but sometimes escalate rather than calm poor behaviour. Lesson planning indicates some understanding of the range of needs within groups, but strategies for tailoring or adjusting tasks to cater for this variation are limited. Misconceptions too often go unnoticed or are embedded because there is insufficient checking of understanding.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students say that they feel safe and that bullying is rare. They feel well equipped to deal with different forms of bullying and this is supported by good advice and guidance. They are particularly proud of how their two former schools have integrated successfully; they mix well, with no signs of factional loyalties.

However, too many students do not engage well in lessons and require constant supervision because activities are not appropriately challenging or engaging. Although the academy's expectation is that new and better systems of behaviour management will reduce the need for exclusion, their initial impact has been to increase both fixed-term and permanent exclusions, as boundaries become established. Attendance is low, although improving slightly in lower years. Persistent absence is high, notably among students eligible for free school meals, girls and some students with special educational needs. Behaviour around the site and in corridors is generally good-natured but occasionally overexuberant. Some inappropriately boisterous conduct goes unchallenged by staff.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

In a short time since taking up post, the headteacher has identified the significant challenges the academy faces in raising achievement and improving teaching. Management of performance is becoming more rigorous. Senior leaders' and governors' evaluation of the academy's strengths and weaknesses is accurate, but capacity for improvement is fragile, because leadership roles are still undergoing change and because evaluation has largely been reliant on external partners. The leadership of mathematics and English is weakened because heads of department are not yet in post. There are interim arrangements for the leadership of provision for disabled students and those with special educational needs. Acting or consultant leaders have a good grasp of priorities for improvement but provide only a temporary solution.

Safeguarding arrangements are strong. There is a dedicated and effective team responsible for monitoring the safety and well-being of vulnerable students; training is regular and appropriate. The integration of separate student communities has been successful, but the aims and vision of the new academy are not yet influencing the quality of its provision sufficiently. Aligning the curricula of two schools has presented a particular challenge. Planning for a new curriculum, better matched to students' needs and centred on a GCSE core rather than over-reliant on alternative qualifications, is under way. It is too early, however, for this to have had an impact on students' achievement. The anticipation of purpose-built accommodation provides an exciting future focus but academy leaders recognise the urgency of first establishing the foundations of high-quality teaching, achievement and behaviour.

External support

The headteacher has made effective use of a range of externally commissioned reviews of achievement and provision. These have added rigour to the academy's evaluation of its performance and informed improvement planning, although their recommendations have not yet been fully implemented. Middle leaders benefit from links with other schools to share and develop good practice. A more coherent approach to the development of consistently effective teaching is emerging but its implementation is embryonic and it is not yet positively influencing practice. The sponsors have added leadership capacity and expertise to mathematics through consultancy and a recent secondment from a partner academy.

Main Judgements

The academy has made inadequate progress. This monitoring inspection has raised serious concerns about the standard of education provided by the academy and I am recommending a further monitoring inspection.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise the achievement of all groups of students, in all subjects but particularly in mathematics, by eradicating inadequate teaching and significantly improving the proportion of good or outstanding teaching. Do this by ensuring that all teachers:
 - plan and deliver lessons that interest, engage and challenge all students and are tailored to meet the full range of needs and abilities
 - monitor students' understanding closely to ensure all make progress throughout lessons and intervene to eliminate misconceptions
 - eradicate disruption to learning by applying behaviour management strategies consistently in all lessons
 - implement coherent strategies to develop basic literacy skills across all curriculum areas
 - provide marking and feedback that are of a consistently high quality and have a demonstrable impact on the quality, quantity and presentation of students' work.
- Improve attendance and reduce persistent absence to be at least in line with national averages for all groups of students by September 2012.
- Develop a coherent and coordinated approach to improving teaching and learning through focused professional development and rigorously monitor its impact.

- Rapidly establish the capacity of leaders at all levels, including those new to the academy, to drive improvement in learning and achievement.

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

Christine Raeside
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
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