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26th April 2012

Mr Eric Jackson
Principal
University Academy Birkenhead
Park Road South
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CH43 5JY

Dear Mr Jackson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of University Academy Birkenhead

Introduction

Following my visit with Joan Davis, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 24 and 25 April 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, other nominated staff, groups of students and the Chair and other members of the Governing Body.

Context

The academy was formed from two predecessor schools in January 2011 and has approximately 900 students. Students' attainment at entry is significantly below average. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is significantly above the national average. The proportion recorded as having special educational needs is significantly above national averages. The academy has five sponsors. The lead sponsor is the University of Chester in partnership with the

University of Liverpool, Birkenhead Sixth Form College, Wirral Metropolitan College and Wirral Borough Council. The academy has been through turbulent times between 2011 and 2012 with the resignation of the academy's first Principal and deputy principal. Issues coalesced around leadership and management and the difficulty in establishing a climate and momentum through which rapid improvements across the provision could be achieved. Staff morale deteriorated. An interim Principal and vice-principal have brought stability and direction. A new permanent Principal has been appointed and is expected to take-up post shortly. The academy is currently conducting redundancy procedures with a view to reducing staff numbers by about twenty-five.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The proportion of students gaining five A* to C grades at GCSE, including English and mathematics, has risen set against the results of the two predecessor secondary schools. In the case of one of the predecessor schools this amounts to a 12 percentage point increase in one year. However, attainment remains below the national average and the academy recognises the need for further rapid and sustained improvement. The scrutiny of current tracking information and evaluation of the most recent results in mathematics indicates that the improving trend will be maintained in 2012. Gaps in performance between groups of students, such as those known to be eligible for free school meals, are narrowing as a result of focused, additional support. The proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades is above the national average and reflects students' good progress in modern foreign languages, science and humanities.

A significant proportion of students enter the academy in Year 7 with weak literacy and numeracy skills. The academy has not yet developed well-focused strategies to ensure that these students make more rapid progress in closing the gap in attainment in English and mathematics. The scrutiny of work and lesson observations in Years 10 and 11 indicates that too many students continue to make grammatical and technical errors, and that their reading skills do not always allow for a secure understanding of texts. The academy acknowledges the need to further embed students' use of literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum and particularly in Years 7 and 8.

The quality of teaching

The best lessons are characterised by sharp planning with the effective use of data to plan activities so that they reflect the needs and abilities of all students. They offer an imaginative range of activities with a sharp focus on students' learning. Students are engaged and respond with enthusiasm to the variety of activities and opportunities to develop their understanding and skills. Well-focused questioning enables students to develop their thinking skills. Teachers use praise and

encouragement to promote high expectations. Outstanding practice was observed in modern foreign languages, science and physical education.

There remains too much satisfactory teaching which lacks challenge and pace. In these lessons there is too much teacher-talk and limited opportunities for students to develop independent learning skills and collaborative work. The planning of paired and group work is weak. Lesson planning is weak and often superficial. Data is not always used effectively to plan lessons and to inform on the variety of activities that will meet the needs of all students and enable them to make better progress. In these lessons there were low expectations and a lack of ambition and students made no better than satisfactory progress.

There is insufficient sharing of good practice across subjects for the most skilled teachers to share their approaches, ideas and strategies and enable the level of teaching across the academy to be raised. The use of assessment to support learning is satisfactory. In some subjects there is infrequent guidance given to students as to what they need to do next to improve. There is also too much variability in the quality of teachers' marking of student work. Very good marking practice was seen in modern foreign languages.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students behave well in lessons and around the academy showing a spirit of cooperation and consideration for one another. Students sometimes demonstrate passivity in lessons which are dominated by too much teacher-talk and lack variety. Students are friendly, courteous and helpful. They say that they feel safe and that bullying issues, including racist and homophobic bullying, are rare and if they occur are dealt with effectively by staff. Attendance is low but initiatives to tackle this are beginning to have some impact.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The current interim Principal and vice principal have brought renewed direction and focus to the academy's work. Staff morale is now improving. The academy's development plan correctly identifies the most important areas for improvement. It clearly recognises the need to improve the effectiveness of quality assurance systems and to ensure they are consistently applied at senior, middle and classroom management levels. In particular, the role of middle leaders requires development so as to enhance their responsibility in the processes through which improvements can be achieved more rapidly. Improved data systems to track and monitor students' progress have been introduced and are being embedded. The management of data, evaluation of performance and tracking of progress is improving.

The management of teaching and learning has a clear focus on the most important areas for improvement and the time scale they need to be delivered within. More-focused professional development programmes for staff are beginning to be

developed to enable teachers to improve and develop new skills. All these positive developments need to be embedded within a more defined aspirational culture.

Governors provide extensive professional experience and skills and strong links to the local community and wider education communities. They are acutely aware of the challenges facing the academy and its community and are highly supportive of the quest for rapid improvement across provision.

External support

Representatives from the sponsors are regular visitors, involved in governance and play a pivotal role in the academy's progress and development. Professional development programmes for staff have been established with the University of Chester. The academy has also drawn on the support of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Good links exist with the local further education and sixth form colleges.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment and achievement rapidly so that students gain five GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics by:
 - raising and sustaining attainment in English and mathematics so that students make at least good progress in these areas
 - embedding literacy across all provision so that students' writing and comprehension skills are improved
 - establishing more-ambitious target setting for individual students.
- Develop focused provision at Key Stage 3 that tackles students' low attainment on entry and their poor skills in literacy, numeracy and oracy.
- Improve the consistency of teaching and learning by:
 - improving lesson planning to ensure that the needs of individual students are met by appropriate, challenging, student-centred activities
 - improving targeted support for all teachers to help them improve their practice in the classroom: developing mechanisms to judge and evaluate the impact of these actions regularly, and use this to inform future teaching and learning improvements
 - sharing outstanding and good practice so that all lessons offer challenge and enable students to make at least good progress.

- Ensure the embedding and consistent application of quality assurance and improvement systems for all senior and middle managers, and in all classroom practice.

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

Patrick Geraghty
Her Majesty's Inspector