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27 April 2012

Ms J Wilkins
The Principal
Skinners' Academy
Woodberry Grove
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N4 1SY

Dear Ms Wilkins

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Skinners' Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Robert Lovett, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 25 and 26 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, staff, groups of pupils and members of the governing body, including a representative of the sponsors. They observed parts of 18 lessons and an assembly.

Context

The academy is sponsored by the Skinners' Company. It opened in September 2010 with girls in Year 11 from its predecessor school, a mixed Year 7, and a sixth form that was predominantly female. In November 2010, it moved to its current site in purpose-built accommodation. There are currently 510 students on roll, comprising 180 in each of Years 7 and 8, and 154 in the sixth form, of whom the vast majority are girls. Students come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, with one third from a range of White backgrounds, one fifth with African heritage and one in seven with Caribbean heritage. Almost a half of the students speak English as an additional language, although very few are at an early stage of learning to speak English. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is more than twice

the national average. There is an above average percentage of disabled students and those who have special educational needs, the main difficulties being behavioural, social and emotional, moderate learning, specific learning, and speech, language and communication. The proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is average. Student mobility is low, with a lower proportion than the average of students joining the academy after the beginning of Year 7. The academy's specialisms are business, enterprise, and information and communication technology (ICT).

The Principal was formerly the headteacher of the predecessor school. When the academy opened, two thirds of its staff were from the predecessor school. Since then, there have been substantial changes, with a number of staff leaving and an increase in staffing to match the growth in student numbers. The staff now includes one third from the predecessor school and four temporary appointments. Following difficulties in recruiting science staff, all science posts have been filled for September 2012. A half of the members of the senior leadership team are new to the academy. The Chair of the Governing Body was a governor of the predecessor school, but all other governors are new.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

In 2011, Year 11 students made excellent progress from their below-average starting points to reach average attainment. In comparison with the predecessor school, they attained more highly, made better progress in mathematics, and maintained the strong progress, both overall and in English. In contrast, attainment in the sixth form fell. While students made strong progress in BTEC and applied GCE information technology courses, they made average progress at A level and below-average progress at AS level, where the failure rate was high.

The students who joined the academy in Years 7 and 8 have a range of attainment that is broadly average overall, although with a lower proportion than average at the higher levels. The academy's records show that the attainment of Year 8 students is already broadly average for the end of Key Stage 3 in English and just below that in mathematics. This level of attainment, more than one year before the end of Key Stage 3, represents strong progress towards the academy's challenging targets of two levels of progress in two years. A substantial proportion of students in Years 7 and 8 are already on track to make progress by the end of Key Stage 4 that is at least as good as the 2011 Year 11 cohort. But in mathematics, one tenth of Year 8 students have remained working at the same level since Key Stage 2. Boys are making less progress than girls, particularly in English, and students' achievement is lower in science and across the range of other subjects than in English and mathematics. There are signs that the academy's actions, such as intervention for those with low reading ages and support for science staff, are closing the gaps. Disabled students and those who have special educational needs make similar progress to their peers, as do students known to be eligible for free school meals, as a result of the academy's thorough tracking and inclusive procedures.

The academy's records show that a greater proportion of sixth form students are on track to meet their targets than was the case last year. This is a result of the academy's targeted support for teaching of the weakest-performing subjects, teachers' increasing familiarity with course requirements, and closer matching of students with courses. Nevertheless, below-average progress at AS level last year reduced the proportion of students who stayed on to take A level, and there has been some drop out from AS-level courses this year. Students retaking GCSE English and mathematics are experiencing more success than previously, although a half did not raise their grade and records do not summarise clearly the number of occasions on which they have retaken the subject and their degree of progress.

A number of factors contribute to students' progress in addition to their learning in lessons. These include the careful tracking of their progress, which leads to targeted intervention by teachers, advisers, the inclusion and behaviour support teams, and by subject and house leaders. Learning is also enhanced through the use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) for homework and for lessons that sixth form students miss. Students make strong progress in lessons where the teaching is good or better, but there are many occasions when activities do not challenge them all or develop their independence as effectively, so progress is slower. Students generally listen well and work hard during lessons.

The quality of teaching

The teaching observed by inspectors varied between good and satisfactory. Teaching quality has improved as a result of support, professional development and staffing changes. Sixth form students welcome teachers' increased support and raised expectations of their progress. Many teachers are very reflective about their practice and how to improve it.

In the better lessons, the activities and questioning engage everyone and encourage students to think and to explain their answers. Teachers know their students well and use this to plan their lessons in detail and ensure that the quieter ones and those having difficulty are drawn in, while sometimes questioning students randomly to keep all on their toes. They involve students in assessing their own learning against criteria they understand well. Teachers use interactive whiteboards well to motivate students and enhance their learning, for example through carefully chosen video material, an example of which deepened students' analytical skills as well as their understanding of discrimination. They deploy teaching assistants effectively to support students while not leading them too much. Teachers exude enthusiasm and manage behaviour well, although they sometimes miss opportunities to develop students' independence.

In the less successful lessons, students apply themselves to their work but the activities are not matched to their differing needs. Sometimes higher attainers are not challenged, or spend too long on undemanding activities before commencing appropriate work. Teachers do not routinely monitor students' progress during the lesson so some are stuck, continue to make errors or use inefficient approaches.

Students do not develop independence well enough, particularly in the sixth form. They spend too long listening to the teacher rather than working alone or in groups to develop their thoughts and written responses, and too readily turn to the teacher for help rather than thinking problems through for themselves. Students work diligently but do not drive themselves to do their best as they are not sure why their work meets the criteria for a particular level, what better quality work would look like or how to improve.

Support for students with low reading ages is targeted well at word level and more generally, and is effective in enabling them to read at their chronological age or above. In some lessons, there is a strong focus on developing oral and written language skills but, in others, opportunities are missed to ensure students use full sentences or apply phonics (the sounds that letters make) and the meaning of known words to help them with new vocabulary.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students show care and respect for each other in lessons and around the academy. Behaviour in lessons is generally good, with a few occasions when some students do not maintain concentration. Students say that the small number of bullying incidents is dealt with well so that differences do not continue. Records show that the number of sanctions issued for behaviour incidents within the academy has decreased, and students find that the process of reflection leads to improved behaviour. The number of fixed-term exclusions is above average, but there have been no permanent exclusions. The procedures for safeguarding, including the vetting of staff, are robust and risk assessments are thorough.

Attendance is well above average overall and for almost all groups, and persistent absence is low. The academy tracks thoroughly students' attendance and behaviour, following up absence and misbehaviour assiduously and making an evident impact on improvements for individuals and groups. Nevertheless, it does not analyse the attendance or behaviour of groups in comparison with national figures.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The Principal's extremely strong drive to raise standards, through the improvement of teaching within the supportive approach of the Skinners' community, underpins the academy's improvement. Robust staffing decisions and the celebration of strong teaching, coupled with challenge and support for weaker teaching, have raised teaching quality. The distribution of leadership responsibilities is working increasingly effectively, with middle leaders observing teaching and providing coaching, as well as using data to inform intervention and evaluation. In turn, these data contribute more effectively to identifying targeted actions and assigning responsibility for them, using an online format for development planning. Staff are more confident in the use of data to inform support, advice, intervention and communication with parents. An increasing proportion of parents log onto the e-portal to monitor their children's performance, behaviour or attendance. Although some group analyses of data are

produced, syntheses that offer ready comparisons with national figures, previous years or explicit targets, or show the proportions making below expected progress, are not routinely provided for leaders and governors. Members of the governing body know the academy's strengths, provide challenge on areas of weakness, such as science teaching, and have begun to collect some first hand evidence through visits.

The academy's self-evaluation is accurate and pinpoints appropriate strengths and weaknesses. For the sixth form, it focuses more on attainment than progress. Some records of observations of lessons concentrate more on the features of teaching than on its impact on the progress of individuals and groups, and so reach generous judgements. The improvements in teaching, progress and behaviour, together with the quality of the academy's evaluation and planning, demonstrate its capacity for further improvement.

Equality, non-discriminatory practice and the valuing of individuals are promoted well through contexts and activities, for example on the civil rights movement. The assembly observed encouraged students to emulate role models and set high aspirations. Residential visits and enrichment activities play a significant role in students' social and cultural development, for example through giving them experience of other ways of life and participating in making music. The specialist subjects encourage high expectations and enterprise skills, including through work with a range of partner companies in London and schools in other countries.

External support

Well-targeted support has been commissioned for teaching in subject areas and the sixth form, for example in science, and for leadership and management, for example for senior leaders, the sixth form and the governing body. Its impact includes increased consistency, a sharper focus on steps for raising achievement and improved teaching.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of teaching that is good or better so that students make more consistently good or better progress in lessons across subjects and years by:
 - ensuring that lessons challenge and support all students through providing activities matched to their needs
 - developing students' independence through greater involvement in collaborative working and less reliance on direction by the teacher

- monitoring students' progress more thoroughly during lessons and involving students more in using criteria they understand to assess their learning and know how to improve.
- Improve students' progress in the sixth form by:
 - matching students more closely with courses
 - improving teaching quality, including teachers' familiarity with course requirements
 - identifying challenging targets for individual students and for overall progress on courses, then frequently monitoring and summarising how well they are being achieved to inform support and ensure improvement.
- Provide leaders and governors regularly with synthesised data on attainment, progress, behaviour and attendance for groups of students showing comparisons against national figures, previous years and explicit 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

Gill Close
Her Majesty's Inspector