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5 July 2012

Dr Nigel Jepson
Principal
Kearsley Academy
Springfield Road
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Bolton
Lancashire
BL4 8HY

Dear Dr Jepson,

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Kearsley Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Ruth James, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 3 and 4 July 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; senior leaders responsible for particular aspects of the academy's work; groups of students; the School Improvement Partner; a head of a partner primary school; the chair of the parent forum; a community governor; and the Chair of the Governing Body, representing the sponsors.

Context

The academy opened in September 2010. There are 389 students on roll, including a small number in the sixth form which opened in September 2011 with plans for significant expansion in September 2012. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups and of those who speak English as an additional language is increasing, but is well below the national average. The proportion of students known

to be entitled to free school meals is well above average. The number of students included in the academy's register of special educational needs is also above average.

Many staff transferred from the predecessor school. However, since the opening of the academy there have been a number of staff changes and new appointments to senior posts.

The academy's lead sponsor is Northern Education and it is co-sponsored by Bolton Council. The academy also has links with a local university. The academy is scheduled to move into new accommodation in March 2013.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The academy's impact on raising standards in the short time since its opening is outstanding. Students' attainment has risen significantly. Published data for 2011, the end of the first year of the academy's operation, show remarkable improvement in examination results. The proportion of students gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, rose by 20 percentage points and was close to the national average. In terms of progress against their previous attainment, girls' achievement was stronger than boys' and a few of the most able students did not reach their full potential.

Data for the current Year 11 shows that they have significantly lower prior attainment than last year's cohort. However, the academy's data show that a higher percentage of students are on track to make three or more levels of progress in both English and mathematics compared with last year. As far as the current Year 10 cohort is concerned, prior attainment is very similar to last year's cohort. Data show that the trend of improvement in attainment and progress is set at a rapid pace for this cohort. Inspection evidence from lesson observations and book scrutinies supports the view that these students are making good progress.

Students' current learning and progress are improving well throughout the academy. In lessons observed during the inspection students were usually making good progress. Inspectors noted a marked improvement in the level of challenge in lessons for the most able. Students say that lessons are more interesting, that improved behaviour helps them to concentrate in lessons, and that they are clear about their targets and the progress they are making. The academy has good systems in place to identify quickly students at risk of underachieving so that extra support is put in place.

Students who are known to be eligible for free school meals achieved in line with the national average in 2011 and achievement for these students continues to improve in the current year. The small proportion of learners from minority ethnic groups achieve well. The academy has set up good arrangements to promote the achievement of disabled students and those who have special educational needs.

They made satisfactory progress in 2011 and the academy's data for the current cohort shows that their progress is also improving quickly.

Students are developing a good range of skills and knowledge. The academy places a high priority on the development of literacy and study skills. Students are encouraged to read more widely and are gaining confidence in reading aloud. Many lessons place an appropriate emphasis on developing their speaking and listening skills, for example through groupwork and debate. These activities also help students to learn to work effectively in teams. Students benefit from good opportunities to learn more about cultural, global and ethical topics. Inspectors saw an excellent lesson on health-related issues which thoroughly engaged learners.

It is too early to judge the outcomes for students in the sixth form, but in lessons observed they were making good progress.

The quality of teaching

The leadership and management of teaching and learning are proving very effective in bringing about significant improvement. Teaching quality has developed very well as a result of support, wide ranging professional development and staffing changes. Students cite improvements in teaching as a key feature of the new academy. Leaders have focused sharply on developing teaching strategies that raise expectations and increase students' engagement. This has promoted a positive and supportive climate for learning. Consequently, the impact of teaching on learning is markedly improved and there is much greater consistency across departments. Teachers have detailed knowledge of the individuals in their classes and use this well in planning, for example noting specific strategies to support those at risk of underachievement against their targets. Leaders regularly monitor the quality of teaching. The outcome of this monitoring informs whole-academy initiatives to improve practice and to tackle underperformance.

Spiritual, moral, social and cultural education is promoted very well in lessons, especially through the use of specific objectives related to personal development. These objectives foster positive attitudes to learning and often relate to effort, independence, perseverance and striving to achieve personal best. There are plenty of opportunities for working in groups and for collaborative learning. In subjects such as physical education and drama, students are encouraged to reflect on and seek ways to improve their own performance.

The vast majority of teaching is good or better and inspectors saw outstanding lessons in a number of subjects. In lessons that are good or better, a broad variety of briskly paced activities captures students' interest and engages them actively in their learning. Good levels of challenge are provided through well-chosen resources that are used effectively to develop and consolidate learning. Literacy is promoted well and subject-specific terminology is carefully explained with a good emphasis on reinforcement. In the best lessons, teachers adapt their plans with confidence to tailor activities to students' needs. In the small minority of satisfactory lessons

teachers are not always quick enough to challenge low-level inattention, whole-class teaching does not engage all students fully or tasks are not entirely appropriate to the levels individuals are working at.

Students' work is marked regularly and marking often includes helpful comments about how students might improve their work. Students are encouraged to take pride in their work and many books are well presented. Assessment is rigorous. Data from regular formal assessments are analysed carefully and teachers are expected to tackle any underperformance in their classes.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Behaviour has improved significantly and is good. The academy provides a calm, safe and welcoming environment for learning. Students move around the school in an orderly fashion. Most show respect for each other and adults in lessons and around the school. Students' attitudes to learning are positive, particularly where teaching challenges them to take greater responsibility for their learning through practical and group activities. In a small number of lessons, a few students do not concentrate as well or display low level inattention especially when tasks and activities do not engage their interest effectively.

A variety of strategies are used to promote good behaviour and the school has effective links with outside agencies to enable appropriate support to be provided to those with particular difficulties. Students report that there is very little bullying and that teachers deal effectively with any that occurs. They say that they feel safe. They appreciate the academy's anti-bullying policy. In a Year 9 assembly centred on empathy, students were encouraged to think about others' feelings. They listened attentively as a teacher explained the meaning of empathy and outlined examples. The talk was well supported by a short video exemplifying the concept well.

Students have responded positively to the higher expectations of them and to the procedures introduced to manage behaviour. They value the system of rewards that acknowledge their achievement and attendance. These improvements are also reflected in a significant reduction in the number of fixed-term exclusions for poor behaviour.

Attendance has improved very well from below average in 2010/11 to above average this year. Persistent absence has decreased substantially as a result of the targeted work of academy staff, including collection of absentees by minibuses. Analyses of the data are thorough and lead to further specific actions to tackle any groups where concerns remain. All staff involved are held to account in regular meetings for their contribution. Work to involve parents and carers increasingly focuses on the impact of absence on progress which is helping to improve parental engagement and cooperation. Re-integration programmes are planned where there has been extensive absence to ensure that students are well prepared for return to mainstream lessons.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The academy is exceptionally well led. A clear and ambitious vision by the principal and senior leaders provides a level of challenge that is driving up standards of attainment quickly. Performance management is strong. Staff are clear about targets and priorities. A relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning has led to an impressive rise in the proportion of lessons that are good or better in a relatively short time. This has been achieved through regular monitoring and extensive staff development. Staff are generally very enthusiastic about the changes that have taken place and are committed to improving standards. Rigorous self-evaluation is a key strength of the academy and it is well placed to make further improvements.

The academy's governors and sponsors support and challenge the academy well. They have taken a strong lead in setting ambitious targets to raise attainment and improve the quality of teaching and learning. The range of backgrounds and expertise on the governing body ensures rigorous monitoring of progress against the key performance indicators. Governors know the academy well and are very clear about its strengths and areas for further development. Governors are clear about statutory requirements and ensure they are met. The academy's procedures for safeguarding learners meet current government requirements.

The tracking and monitoring of students' progress is detailed and regular. Reports on the progress of each student in each subject are being used well to inform intervention strategies and action plans for each class. The role of middle leaders is developing. Training on the use of student tracking data is helping to develop their skills. It is too early to see the full impact of this and the academy recognises this as an area for further development.

The academy has made excellent progress in developing effective links with its primary schools and the local community. The proportion of parents and carers who have placed the academy as their first choice for next year is significantly increased on previous years, thus reversing a trend of declining numbers in the predecessor school. The work undertaken in partnership with the primary school is a model of good practice. Staff from the academy participate in teaching in the primary schools. This enables them to plan the transition to the academy very effectively in terms of curriculum and teaching and learning styles. It allows staff to learn from each other and primary schools appreciate the subject specialisms brought by the academy's staff. The academy is also involved in a number of community projects. Representatives from the local community speak of the academy's enhanced reputation.

The curriculum has improved significantly, especially at Key Stage 3. Close links with primary schools have led to the introduction of a successful accelerated curriculum in Year 7. This builds well on students' achievements in primary school and places

appropriate emphasis on the development of literacy and personal learning and thinking skills.

Plans are well advanced for the significant expansion of the sixth form in September 2012. The leader in charge of this development brings extensive experience from a similar role in a previous school. Detailed and well-developed plans are in place for the curriculum, staffing and personal development of the sixth form students. The academy's new building includes designated accommodation for the sixth form. The capital project for the new build is well managed by the governors and senior leadership, and is on target to open as planned in the spring of 2013.

External support

The academy has benefitted well from external support from its lead sponsor, the local authority and other partners. It now has sufficient expertise within its own management and staffing to continue to make improvements in line with its development plan, and is beginning to share aspects of good practice it has developed with other schools.

Main Judgements

The academy has made outstanding progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Monitor the impact of the provision and actions the academy has put in place to ensure students make good progress in all subjects, that the gap in achievement between girls and boys continues to narrow, and that the most able students achieve the high grades they are capable of.
- Evaluate the impact of the training in place to develop the skills of middle leaders, including the effective use of students' progress data.

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

Sue Harrison
Her Majesty's Inspector