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Mr Oliver Button
Queensbury Academy
Langdale Road
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Dear Mr Button

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Queensbury Academy

Following my visit with Elaine Taylor Her Majesty's Inspector to your academy on 12 and 13 February 2013, 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 monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the academy's predecessor school was judged to be a school causing concern.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, senior and middle leaders, groups of students, teachers and teaching assistants, members of the governing body and a representative of the sponsors. They examined the results of a parental questionnaire conducted by the academy.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time:

The academy is making reasonable progress in raising standards for all students.

Context

Queensbury Academy opened in September 2012, sponsored by the CfBT Schools Trust. Its predecessor, Queensbury Upper School, had been in special measures since October 2011. Students and most of the staff transferred from the predecessor school to the academy. The academy Principal was appointed prior to opening and had no connection with the predecessor school. In January 2013, a new Senior Vice-Principal was appointed to join the restructured senior leadership team and a new

Chair of Governors was announced. The academy is currently in the midst of a major staffing restructure which will take effect from Easter 2013. This includes a new faculty structure for subject leadership, a new house-based pastoral system, and the redundancy of four teachers and seven other staff. Most areas of the curriculum are appropriately staffed, but the academy has found it difficult to recruit specialist mathematics teachers.

The academy has just under 1,000 students, which is average for a secondary school. Most of the students are of White British heritage. The academy has an average proportion of students who are disabled or who have special educational needs. The academy receives extra government funding, known as the pupil premium, to help raise the attainment of students who are looked after and those known to be entitled to free school meals. The proportion of students in these groups is below average.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The attainment of students is average overall, though there are some variations among groups and subjects. This means that students' progress is broadly in line with expectations, taking into account their average entry attainment at the end of Key Stage 2. Students in the sixth form are making reasonable progress, but are not always pushed to develop their skills of analysis and critical thinking.

Students have welcomed the culture for learning established by the Principal. Most students have made the expected progress in English. One exception is the small group of Year 11 students who are receiving enhanced support for their special educational needs, where progress has stalled in both English and mathematics. The progress of Year 11 students since September is below expectation in mathematics. This is because many of the students took their GCSE examinations last year, in the predecessor school, and some were allowed to settle for the grade they achieved at that time. In particular, some of the most-able students are not fulfilling their potential to obtain the A and A* grades that would equip them well for further study in mathematics.

During the inspection, students made reasonable progress in most of the lessons seen and good progress in half of them. In the better lessons, students were encouraged to contribute to discussion, make independent notes, improve their work in response to feedback and reflect on what they had learned. Year 9 students are improving their literacy skills through lessons that focus on reading for meaning and using sources to locate information. Students are making slower progress in mathematics because they do not always understand the explanations or do enough independent work to achieve fluency with the techniques they have been taught. Their learning of new topics is slowed because they do not remember previous work.

The academy now tracks the progress of all students and identifies those who are falling behind. Nevertheless, there are still variations among different groups of

students. For example, boys do better than girls in mathematics and girls do better than boys in English. The pupil premium funding is being used to support the students for whom it is intended. In the academy's latest assessments, Year 11 students in this group were an average of half a grade behind other students in English and nearly a full grade behind in mathematics. However, these gaps are smaller than typically seen.

The quality of teaching

There is little inadequate teaching, but teaching is not consistently good. Teachers structure their lessons carefully and make increasing use of a variety of teaching techniques. Some new techniques are used with only partial success at first, but they become more effective as teachers learn when they are most appropriate. In the best lessons, teachers set tasks that require initiative, creativity and teamwork. Teachers increasingly refer to information about students' previous learning and about their special educational needs to personalise students' learning. However, the reality of the lesson does not always match what was planned. For example, instead of moving the most-able students rapidly on to the harder work, teachers sometimes expect them to work through all of the standard material first.

The quality of learning support is improving as teachers and teaching assistants use the guidance on how to support each student, provided by the special educational needs coordinator. However, support plans for some disabled students and those who have special educational needs still do not have clear targets.

Teaching contributes to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development through various subjects. For example, students consider the morals of war in history, find out about the experiences of Ghanaian children in geography, and learn about pop-culture by studying Roy Lichtenstein in art.

Senior leaders have encouraged teachers to think carefully how they will find out what students know, can do, and understand. Teachers circulate when students are engaged in independent work, checking that they are getting started and maintaining a good pace of work. The best teaching uses carefully chosen questions to probe all students' understanding and to encourage them to justify their answers. In some cases, however, question and answer sessions only involve the more-able or more confident students, or require only factual recall rather than analysis.

The quality of marking is variable. Some is good: teachers take care to identify specific improvements that students can make to their work. However, it is not always clear whether the advice is being followed. Marking is weaker in mathematics because teachers base their comments too much on students' self-marking and not enough on detailed scrutiny of the working. As a result, the main focus is on correct answers rather than on identifying and correcting errors in working.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The academy has a positive climate for learning. This is due to the high expectations established by the Principal and promoted by all staff as the 'Queensbury 10' code of conduct. Attendance is now in line with the average for all secondary schools, and persistent absence is under control. This is a result of sterling work to get reluctant students back into school. Punctuality to lessons is good. Students and their parents agree that the school provides a safe environment. Safeguarding procedures meet current requirements.

During the inspection, most students conducted themselves well in lessons and around the school, behaving safely despite the temptation of a recent snowfall. Students understand and largely respect the system of rewards and sanctions. However, some are concerned that a few teachers are too rigid about rules, such as issuing sanctions when a student is only seconds late. Students agree that behaviour is better than last year, but a few report low-level disruption affecting some of their lessons. This is consistent with inspectors' observations and academy records, which show that senior staff are called out to around one lesson in fifty. The use of exclusions is broadly average overall, but students who have special educational needs are 30 times as likely to be excluded as other students.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The academy has set itself the ambitious target of becoming one of the best in the country within the next two years. The Principal has made sure that he is a highly visible figure in the school. Students have been impressed at how often they see him visiting lessons or around the school at break times.

The Principal and the governing body have confronted difficult issues, such as making several staff redundant, to balance the finances. Senior leaders recognise the challenges they face because they have a clear understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. For example, the academy leaders recognise that the current provision for mathematics is not good enough.

A new leadership structure has been introduced to ensure that all staff know what is expected of them and how they will be monitored. The appraisal system includes targets for better teaching and faster student progress. Lessons are frequently observed to identify the best teachers and those whose work requires improvement. During the inspection, joint lesson observations with senior leaders suggested that these judgements are slightly generous. Senior staff have regular meetings with subject leaders to discuss their improvement plans and to check that they are having the desired effect. Each term, there is a focused review of a subject area.

While senior staff and the governing body are never complacent, their monitoring is not always sharp enough. For example, while the monitoring of individual students is well established, the information is not collated well enough to provide a clear

picture of students' collective progress. For example, the academy has set itself targets for examination results, but not for students' attainment in Years 9 and 10. The targets have not been broken down to provide milestones indicating the levels expected by the end of each term. Some of the problems with data management were inherited from the predecessor school, but they have not been addressed with enough urgency. In addition, the first subject area review did not make a strong enough link between teaching and the outcomes for different groups of students, and subject-specific issues were not given enough weight.

The quality of teaching is improving because of the strategies introduced by the leadership team. These include a clear statement of what is expected of teachers, backed up with fortnightly training sessions, each focusing on a particular aspect of teaching. Good practice is spread through teacher 'triads', where three teachers work together to share ideas and to provide mutual support.

The priorities identified in the academy improvement plan are all valid and sensible, but there is no commitment to improving special educational needs provision. This would be expected because the provision in the predecessor school did not meet the special educational needs code of practice. The present policy requires improvement because it puts too little emphasis on students making good progress and makes no mention of disabled students. The new Senior Vice-Principal for inclusion is now taking this matter forward alongside the special educational needs coordinator.

The governing body is in the early stages of establishing itself because it has had to appoint a new Chair of the Governing Body. This means that some smaller issues have been overlooked, such as gaps in the information provided on the academy website. Governors are committed to holding the academy to account. They seek information from a variety of sources, including parents, carers and the community.

External support

The academy has had strong support from its sponsor, including training sessions, consultant support for English and mathematics, coaching for middle leaders and monitoring visits to validate the academy's self-evaluation. The academy has worked well in partnership with other education providers. Good communication with its sixth form partner and with local providers of vocational courses mean that students who learn elsewhere are safe, closely monitored and assured of effective teaching.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve students' achievement in mathematics by ensuring that:
 - teachers work together to identify the most effective approaches to each topic
 - students complete enough independent and varied work on each topic to equip them to deal with unfamiliar questions
 - teachers undertake some detailed marking to identify misconceptions and to identify where students might be going wrong
 - students are not routinely entered early for GCSE examinations.

- Raise achievement for students who have special educational needs and reduce their high levels of exclusion by:
 - raising expectations for their progress so that it matches other students nationally with similar starting points
 - linking the guidance provided to teachers with ambitious targets for students' attainment and, where necessary, their behaviour.

- Improve the quality of teaching and learning for more-able students and sixth formers by ensuring that:
 - the more-able students are quickly moved on to suitably challenging work
 - questioning encourages students to think analytically and critically.

- Improve the quality and sharpness of self-evaluation by:
 - ensuring that teaching judgements take subject-specific criteria into account
 - collating assessment information for each year group to provide a clear picture each term of how well they are doing and how well they should be doing, using formats compatible with national performance measures
 - providing a breakdown of the above information for different groups so senior leaders and governors can evaluate the impact of improvement initiatives.

In view of the high proportion of students involved in external examinations in the summer term, I recommend that the academy receive its first section 5 inspection in the spring term of 2014.

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 published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Abbott
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body, Queensbury Academy
 The Academies Advisers Unit, DfE