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17 May 2013

Mr David Gaston
Principal
The Dean Academy
Church Road
Lydney
GL15 5DZ

Dear Mr Gaston

No formal designation monitoring inspection of The Dean Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 15–16 May 2013 with Pauline Robins, Her Majesty's Inspector, 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

We observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with you, the Chief Executive of Prospects Academies Trust, the Chair of the Governing Body and vice-chair, senior and middle leaders, groups of pupils and a representative from the academy trust who is supporting your work.

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 pupils.

Context

The academy, sponsored by the Prospects Academies Trust, opened on 1 November 2012, following the closure of Whitecross School (Foundation). The academy caters for students aged 11 to 16 and is located in the same buildings as its predecessor school. Nearly all of the staff from the predecessor school transferred to the academy. The academy has faced some challenges, including declining numbers of

students and difficulties in recruitment to specific posts, for example specialist teachers of mathematics.

There are currently 905 students on roll. Almost all students are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is very much smaller than seen nationally. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for the pupil premium is increasing year-on-year but still remains lower than average. The pupil premium is additional funding based on the number of students in local authority care, those from service families and those known to be eligible for free school meals. The proportion of disabled students and those supported by school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is below the national average.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The academy is building with determination on the work done by the predecessor school to increase students' progress and raise standards. Students' standards of attainment on entry to Year 7 in reading, writing and mathematics are significantly below those found nationally. These historic weaknesses, especially in the standards of students' literacy, represent a significant barrier to learning across the curriculum for a large number of students. The overall rates of progress in mathematics lessons are improving strongly and securely for all groups of students. There is also an improvement in English, although this is less marked across the school. Nevertheless, there is too much variation in the quality of teaching, which results in an uneven pattern of achievement overall.

Teachers understand the importance of planning carefully to meet the needs of students of different abilities in each class but their effectiveness in achieving this is very variable. Consequently, the rate of improvement is not consistent for all subjects and groups of students. Girls continue to make better progress than boys. Disabled students and those with special educational needs are well looked after and are making similar progress to their peers. There are examples of accelerated progress for some, particularly in mathematics. The underlying weaknesses in the development of literacy skills continue to have a detrimental effect on the achievement of boys, students being supported at school action and students eligible for the pupil premium. It is crucial that the academy closes such gaps in performance and secures consistently good achievement for all groups of students.

Academy leaders, using support from the sponsor, have put in place an extensive programme of intervention to help students in the current Year 11 for GCSE examinations in 2013, particularly in English and mathematics. Creative use of staffing, grouping, booster sessions and personalised programmes are all contributing to accelerated progress. The academy's information on students' progress shows that standards are rising and that increasing proportions are on track to make at least the progress expected given their different starting points. For

example, gaps in performance of the Year 11 students eligible for the pupil premium have closed rapidly and these students are now making adequate progress.

The quality of teaching

The proportion of lessons that are well taught has increased since the academy opened. Teaching is improving as a result of determined efforts by senior leaders to drive up standards. Incidents of inadequate teaching have reduced significantly as teachers are held increasingly to account for the progress students make. A programme of structured opportunities exists for all teachers to share 'what works well' in the classroom and there is a strong focus on developing students' literacy skills across the curriculum. However, academy leaders recognise that teaching is not yet consistently and securely good and more work is needed to eradicate entrenched low achievement. In too many lessons, the levels of expectation and support are not high enough for students to develop and explain their ideas through discussion and/or more detailed and sophisticated responses. Newly introduced techniques to support pupils' writing are used with varying levels of success within and across subjects. Sometimes the teacher does not explain or model what good quality work will look like, so students do not know what they are aiming to achieve. Although they are improving, a number of students still struggle to present their work properly, using accurate spelling and punctuation. In particular, boys' writing and that of students eligible for the pupil premium is limited by their ability to use full sentence answers and to construct an argument to show how much they know and have understood.

Some good teaching was seen during the inspection which moved pupils' learning quickly forward. Such teaching at the academy is typically characterised by high expectations and careful planning that is based on a close understanding of pupils' starting points and learning needs, to ensure rapid progress for all. The most effective teachers know exactly where pupils are in their learning, understand when they are ready to take the next steps and convey clearly how this can best be achieved. They are skilled in setting work that provides a good level of challenge and is carefully structured throughout the lesson to promote students' engagement and good progress. For example, in a Year 11 mathematics lesson, pupils enjoyed being challenged to apply their understanding of mathematical concepts to solve a series of problems across familiar and unfamiliar contexts. The teacher's strong subject knowledge and skilful management of the lesson encouraged a high level of dialogue and discussion. The students delighted in working together and with the teacher and were totally engrossed throughout.

The quality of marking is improving and most teachers offer positive comments and highlight what students need to do next. However, not all teachers follow up marking by insisting that pupils improve a specific aspect of their work, for example by redoing a problem they found difficult or did not complete. Variation is also evident in the way that teachers are using the agreed literacy cards and targets to improve students' literacy skills. The development of academic subjects,

complemented by work-related courses, is enabling students to achieve in ways appropriate to their individual strengths and reinforces their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Despite steady improvement since the academy opened, further improving pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour and attendance, especially in Year 8, remains a priority. Students feel safe and are positive about the improved behaviour around the academy since it opened. This view is supported by a drop in exclusions and recorded incidents of poor behaviour. Staff are visible around the site and this helps to maintain a calm and orderly atmosphere. Relationships between staff and students are very positive and supportive. This is particularly evident in the work of learning support assistants. Attendance is slightly below average and the academy has put an appropriate range of strategies in place to drive it up further.

Students were keen to share their views about different lessons with inspectors. While they believe that teachers have increasingly high expectations with regard to behaviour, the students said that not all teachers apply the academy's behaviour policies consistently. They are critical of lessons that are uninteresting and involve repetitive tasks such as lists of questions or copying from the board. In these cases, not all students give their full attention or behave in a way that supports learning. The academy is currently reviewing its system for tracking and monitoring patterns of behaviour for individuals and different groups of students within and across subjects.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The senior leadership team has high aspirations for the students of The Dean Academy. They are justifiably proud of the progress that the academy has made but acknowledge that much is still to be achieved and that the pace of change needs to accelerate in order for students to benefit fully. Senior leaders are a group of skilled professionals who bring their individual strengths together under the leadership of a resolute Principal to be a strong and cohesive team. Their evaluation of the academy's position is accurate, particularly in relation to teaching and learning. During the inspection all lesson observations were carried out jointly between an inspector and a member of the academy leadership team; all judgements matched and the reasoning behind arriving at judgements agreed.

Information on students' progress is accurate and systems to monitor the academy are being effectively used to hold staff to account. Standards are improving across the academy as the quality of teaching also improves. This demonstrates that the academy has the capacity to sustain further improvement. Lines of accountability from senior managers through to middle managers are clear and there is a consistent monitoring and evaluation process which includes a regular, documented

meeting programme. The structure of these line management groupings is enabling middle leaders and managers to work together towards a consistency of practice which has yet to become fully embedded. The capacity for improvement is also evident by the academy-wide literacy strategy which has recently been introduced. This is a clear example of good practice from both the collaborative way it was developed to the impact it is already having on improving students' writing skills and involving them in their learning. Staff also talked very positively about various examples of training they have received but in particular the after-school cross-curricular meetings. During these sessions staff who are particularly skilled in a certain aspect of their work, for example revision planning or assessment, take the lead to develop and model this good practice.

Governing body minutes show that governors are beginning to ask probing questions of leaders and managers; this will enable them to more fully understand the effectiveness of the academy and the level of progress that students make. In order to complete the cycle of monitoring and evaluation, governors recognise that they need to constantly return to issues to check for impact and improvement and ask the 'so what?' question. Currently the team of governors is very small and hard-working; there are a significant number of governor vacancies and this hampers the governors in setting up an efficient committee structure and ensuring that all meetings are quorate. The academy trust is currently working hard to recruit governors with a range skills and expertise from the local community.

External support

The Chief Executive from the Prospects Academies Trust is fully committed to improving the life chances for students at The Dean Academy. Together with the academy challenge partner he has a secure understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the academy and the issues which lie ahead. The Principal has appreciated the resources which come from being part of a larger organisation, particularly the provision of services from the human resources department. The academy is also benefiting from improvements to the infrastructure of the buildings and additional finance to support the Year 11 mentoring programme; the latter already demonstrating an impact in raising expected outcomes for this group of students. The challenge partner visits the academy regularly and provides academy leaders with an external and objective view of their progress. He has made a good start in working to support the governors in developing their role and how they can best hold leaders to account for the standards that students achieve.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment and achievement in all subjects by ensuring that there is a greater proportion of good or outstanding teaching by:

- ensuring that all teachers plan lessons that meet students’ different needs, provide appropriate challenge, regardless of students’ ability or starting points, and amend their teaching according to students’ progress during the lesson
 - building on the strong start with the recently introduced literacy strategy and embedding this fully so that students are better able to develop and explain their ideas through discussion and more detailed and sophisticated written responses
 - ensuring consistency in the use of routine opportunities for students to respond to teachers’ comments and engage in a dialogue about learning and assessment.
- Improve the impact of leaders at all levels on raising achievement for all groups of students, particularly boys and those eligible for the pupil premium, by:
- increasing the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems to drive improvements more evenly and consistently across the curriculum
 - sharpening the way in which middle leaders track and measure students’ progress and evaluating rigorously the impact of the actions that they are taking to improve students’ outcomes.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the Chair of the Governing Body for Gloucestershire and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Karl Sampson
Her Majesty’s Inspector