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12 July 2013

Ms R Elcocks
Principal
Four Dwellings Academy
Dwellings Lane
Birmingham
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Dear Ms Elcocks

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Four Dwellings Academy

Following my visit with Peter Humphries, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 10–11 July 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, reviewed documents and met with the Principal, senior and middle leaders, students in Years 7 and 10, and a representative of the academy sponsor, the Academies Enterprise Trust, who is also the acting Chair of the Governing Body. Inspectors observed 16 lessons.

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

The conversion to academy status took place on 1 March 2013. The Principal took up her post on 1 April 2013. The leadership team has since been restructured, and a vice-principal has been appointed to start on 1 September 2013.

The academy is smaller than the average-sized secondary school. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is high. The proportion of

students from minority ethnic groups is high, and the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language is above average. The proportion of students supported at school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is above average, as is the proportion supported at school action.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The progress that students make has improved since the academy opened. In Year 11, the gap in attainment in English and mathematics between students who are known to be eligible for free school meals, and so qualify for the pupil premium, and other students is relatively low. It is about one quarter of a GCSE grade in English and less than that in mathematics. In other year groups this gap has closed even further. The most able students are also making better progress and their targets are now suitably challenging. However, improvements are not yet fully embedded and the progress of these students is still currently below national expectations.

Since the academy opened, the way students who are disabled or have special educational needs are catered for has been substantially improved. The special educational needs register has been rationalised to make sure that it contains only the appropriate students. Better monitoring and support make sure that they receive the right help and guidance. These students are now making better progress, but again the changes will need time to embed to ensure that this improved progress is maintained.

Students are reading much more. Students in Years 7, 8 and 9 have dedicated reading time each day. Other new initiatives have also been introduced to improve reading. As a result, students are reading books at the right level for their ability and the number of books borrowed from the academy library has tripled since the academy opened. Students say that they are now reading more at home as well as in the academy. These developments are at an early stage, but are already having an impact. Their potential is great.

Students say that they feel they are making more progress since the academy opened, as their lessons have greater purpose and structure. They enjoy lessons, especially when they can be creative, and appreciate the range of extra-curricular opportunities available. In lessons observed, students participated well in activities including investigating in science experiments, developing ideas in music and developing skills in design technology.

The quality of teaching

The system for monitoring and improving teaching has improved, and is focused sharply on developing particular skills. This has already led to better teaching. Teachers have much more access to data on students' performance, and use it better to prepare lessons at the right level of difficulty. Teachers prepare lessons that are active and are designed to meet the needs of varying abilities within their

classes. In most cases this is leading to better progress. However, in some cases the activities prepared are not well matched to the lesson objectives.

Training has also focused on the way teachers ask questions, to make sure they ask some questions at a deeper level. In many lessons observed, questioning was indeed more skilful and probed students' understanding. In some lessons, however, questions still required only brief responses and reflected a low level of challenge. Sometimes they did not demand enough from the most able students.

In some classes teaching assistants were used well to develop the learning of students who were disabled or had special educational needs. They supported students and helped them to make progress. On other occasions teaching assistants were less aware of how they could contribute to students' learning.

The best teaching contributed well to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. In history, Year 9 students gained an understanding of, and an empathy with, the implications of extremist activity in the Middle East. In music, Year 8 students developed a composition with independence and imagination.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

The behaviour of students has continued to improve since the academy opened. The proportion of fixed-term exclusions has fallen sharply and there have been no permanent exclusions this term. Students behave well around the academy and in class, with occasional low-level disruption where teaching is less engaging. The incidence of bullying is low. Students say that any bullying that does occur is dealt with swiftly, and that they feel very safe in the academy. The academy has a friendly environment where all students are welcomed.

The new Principal has restructured the academy day to make it more purposeful and placed a renewed emphasis on attendance, which has improved substantially since the academy opened. Punctuality to the academy and to lessons has also improved.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The new Principal has already had a major impact on improving the academy. She has introduced a new approach to self-evaluation, which is exemplary. It is data-led, concise, insightful and leads directly into planning, which is also of high quality. Since she took up her post, there have been improvements in teaching, achievement, the provision for disabled students and those who have special educational needs, and attendance. Students' behaviour has continued to improve.

The senior leadership team has been restructured to improve the clarity of roles and accountability. These changes are recent, however, and some leaders are not yet fully playing their new roles. The quality of subject leadership continues to improve, but these leaders are not yet all fully confident in their roles.

The Principal has a good understanding of the quality of teaching in the academy. Teachers described the training and coaching they have received to develop their skills as much improved. Leaders have been perceptive in the areas of teaching chosen for development. The impact has varied, however, as some teachers have been quick to change their practice but others have been less able to adapt and the strategies need further embedding.

The new governing body has made a good start. Vacancies have nearly been fully filled, with two final appointments expected soon. The early emphasis has been on training members in their roles, and this training has included safeguarding, the management of staff performance and the spending of the pupil premium funding. Records of meetings show that governors are increasingly holding academy leaders to account with their questions. Currently the Chair of the Governing Body is the regional director for the academy sponsor. This is a transitional arrangement and a permanent chair will be elected in the autumn term when the governing body membership is complete. All aspects of safeguarding are being managed well.

The curriculum has been reviewed and changes due in September will better meet the needs, interests and aspirations of students. The length of lessons will also change; in the past some have been very long and this has led to reduced progress.

External support

The Academies Enterprise Trust has provided good support for the academy. Good-quality coaching has been provided for the Principal and senior leadership team. There has also been good support in English and mathematics to coach subject leaders and develop the curriculum and the quality of teaching. The sponsor's regional director maintains an effective oversight of the successes and needs of the academy.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further improve the progress made by all groups of students, especially the most able and students who are disabled or have special educational needs.
- Embed fully the strategies being adopted to improve the quality of teaching.
- Develop further the effectiveness of senior leaders and subject leaders.

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

Robert Barbour
Her Majesty's Inspector