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Mr Geraint Parry
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Parry

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to University Academy of Birkenhead, Wirral

Following my visit to your academy on 18 October 2013, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report on the findings of my visit. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the academy since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in July 2013. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection.

Evidence

During the visit, meetings were held with you, other senior and middle leaders, students, members of the governing body and a representative of the main sponsor to discuss the action taken since the last inspection. I evaluated the school's improvement plan and scrutinised other documentation provided by the academy. I undertook a short learning walk with a member of the senior leadership team for a brief opportunity to observe teaching and see students' work.

Context

Since the last inspection, some changes in middle leadership have taken place, including new management arrangements for English. Several staff left in July as part of the academy's long-term restructuring.

Main findings

You and other staff in the academy have accepted the inspection judgements. While the academy's development plan addresses the key areas for improvement and includes opportunities for review each half-term, the 'milestones' could be quantified more where appropriate, so that progress towards objectives can be more sharply measured.

The unvalidated GCSE results in 2013 indicate better achievement overall, including in the key measure of five or more passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics. At the July 2013 inspection, one of the areas for improvement was to maintain the momentum of improvement in science and mathematics and greatly accelerate it in English. The provisional 2013 results confirm clear improvements in English, although progress measures still require further improvement. Results in science, very encouragingly, confirm an upward trend in attainment and indicate good achievement. However, in mathematics, progress measures dropped and too few students made or exceeded the expected three levels of progress. You accept that improving students' progress in mathematics is an issue that now has a higher priority for the academy.

While some attainment gaps narrowed, other gaps between the attainment of students known to be entitled to free school meals and other students, such as in the proportions of students gaining grades A* to C in English and in mathematics, were wider in 2013 than 2012. Monitoring records of current Year 11 students show evidence of a slight narrowing of the gap for current students, but this needs to be a continued area of focus for the academy.

Revisions to the academy's procedures for promoting good attendance and behaviour were already under review at the time of the July 2013 inspection. Revised procedures were introduced in September 2013 and early indications are that they are having a clear positive impact. The academy has appointed an additional member of staff to focus on attendance, as well as strengthening rewards and following up more rigorously with parents where students are not in school. As a result, attendance measures are consistently more positive than at the same time last year and fewer students are persistently absent. Middle leaders now take a more central role in improving behaviour. Students and staff report that this, together with the new behaviour policy, has helped to improve behaviour and students' engagement in the classroom. Figures that show fewer exclusions and less use of the academy's internal sanctions than at the equivalent time last year reinforce this view.

The academy has strengthened its measures designed to improve teaching. A focus on medium-term planning is helping to promote more consistency in teaching approaches. This, together with additional links with other schools is helping staff to share and learn from the good practice that exists in the academy and elsewhere. Plans for staff development later this term include a focus on more differentiated teaching and providing students with more challenging work. Plans to develop the specific aspects of teachers' questioning and students' independent learning skills are less clear.

You and other senior leaders have a realistic view of the most recent GCSE results. You have recognised the importance of mathematics in the academy by providing additional curricular time and staffing, as well as reducing the range of ability within individual classes. The practice of using registration time for students to read regularly demonstrates the academy's focus on developing literacy skills; additional strategies for developing students'

literacy skills identified in the improvement plan have yet to show a clear impact.

Several meetings of the governing body have taken place since the inspection, and have included opportunities to discuss the findings of the inspection. Governors accept the findings as accurate and have a good understanding of how the 2013 GCSE results might change the school's development priorities. Governors have helped to manage the recent staff restructuring and its impact on middle leadership. They are also contributing actively to the academy's drive to forge closer links with parents, such as through setting up a group to canvass parental views.

Ofsted may carry out further visits and, where necessary, provide further support and challenge to the school until its next section 5 inspection.

External support

Since the inspection, the main sponsor has played a leading part in arranging and funding a partnership with a local outstanding school. Staff from the outstanding school are sharing expertise and providing training, including for some accredited courses. At present, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of the partnership. Staff from the main sponsor also contribute to a quality assurance group, established to monitor the academy's progress towards becoming good.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Governing Body.

Yours sincerely

Paul Chambers
Her Majesty's Inspector