

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22

West Lancs Investment Centre T 0300 123 1231

Maple View

Skelsmersdale

WN8 9TG

Text Phone: 0161 6188524

enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566937

Direct F 01695 729320

Direct email: jsimmons@cfbt.com

30 January 2015

Mr Kevin McDermott
Principal
University of Chester CE Academy
164 Whitby Road
Ellesmere Port
Cheshire
CH65 6EA

Dear Mr McDermott

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of University of Chester CE Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 29 January 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the academy's previous monitoring inspection.

The inspection was the second monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to have serious weaknesses following the section 5 inspection which took place in October 2013. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

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

The academy is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the University of Chester Academy Trust, the Strategic Director of Children's Services for Cheshire West and Chester and the Director of Education for the Church of England Diocese of Chester.

Yours sincerely

John Nixon
Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in October 2013.

- Ensure that all teaching is good or better to increase students' progress, especially in English and mathematics, so that it is at least good, and to improve students' attitudes to learning in lessons by:
 - making sure that all teaching sets tasks that are at the right level of challenge for students of differing abilities
 - ensuring that the pace of all teaching and learning is brisk and that the learning activities provided for students fully engage them in their learning and capture their interest
 - ensuring that teaching in all subjects uses questioning effectively to make students think deeply and encourage them to give extended and reasoned responses
 - making sure that teaching in all subjects has a sharper focus on developing students' literacy, communication and numeracy skills
 - improving the quality of marking so that it is consistent in showing students what they need to do to improve their work.
- Make sure that the achievement of the most-able students improves significantly to reflect their individual starting points and prepares them better for the challenges of the sixth form by:
 - ensuring that teaching is always challenging enough
 - reducing the students' reliance on their teachers and thus promoting their skills as independent learners more effectively.
- Improve achievement in the sixth form, especially in AS and A-level subjects, by:
 - making sure that all teaching encourages students' independent learning and research skills
 - ensuring that students are guided more accurately on to courses of study that are appropriate to their individual abilities and needs.
- Improve the impact of leadership and management, including the governing body, on raising achievement at a faster pace by:
 - making sure that subject leaders are more involved in and held more accountable for students' achievement in their areas of responsibility, especially the most-able students
 - making the focus on students' progress much sharper in procedures for managing the performance of teachers
 - improving the rigour with which the governing body holds the academy to account for improving students' achievement and improving the quality of teaching.

An external review of governance should be undertaken in order to assess how this aspect of leadership and governance may be improved.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 29 January 2015

Evidence

During this inspection meetings were held with the Principal; other senior and middle leaders; a group of pupils; three representatives of the academy's governing body statement of action committee (SOAC), including its chair; the executive Principal; and the director of school improvement for the sponsoring trust.

The inspector, accompanied by the Principal, visited English and mathematics lessons in Key Stages 3 and 4. Work in students' books and other documents relating to school improvement were evaluated.

This monitoring inspection focused on the impact of actions taken by leaders to improve the quality of teaching and achievement of students in English and mathematics in Key Stages 3 and 4, including how well staff are being held to account.

Context

Following the decision of the Principal designate not to take up post, the existing Principal remains in place. In addition, the executive Principal has been confirmed in post for the long term.

Since the previous monitoring inspection 14 teachers, including the heads of departments for English and mathematics, have left their posts. They have been replaced by 14 teachers, including six in the English department and five in the mathematics departments. New leaders have taken up post in these subjects.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

In 2014, the proportion of students achieving five GCSE qualifications at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, remained significantly below the national figure. The rates of progress made by students from their relative starting points in English and mathematics also stalled in 2014 and remained similar to those achieved in 2013. The proportion of pupils making expected progress in English in 2014 increased to be closer to the national average. These poor results had been anticipated by the academy's leaders as their improved monitoring of students' achievement indicated that progress had not accelerated quickly enough. Leaders at all levels have strengthened their resolve to accelerate the rate of improvement in the academy and have taken appropriate actions.

Governance continues to improve. Governors have a more accurate understanding of standards as a result of action by SOAC following the recognition that previously some data presented to governors were unreliable. Governors now undertake more thorough and regular cross-checking of students' progress data with different school

leaders. They also examine students' work in books to check that this matches the standards that leaders have recorded. Furthermore, governors commissioned an external review, which has provided them with an independent analysis of current standards.

Senior leaders have taken decisive actions that are improving the quality of leadership and management in English and mathematics. Both departments have been restructured and new leaders have been recruited. Students are now making better progress in these subjects as a result of improved leadership, raised expectations and better teaching, including the more consistent application of the academy's marking policy. Students are given more information by their teachers about what is good in their work. The inclusion of information about how work could be improved further is developing well in English, but is less frequently seen in the feedback to students in mathematics books. Students welcome the time given to them to improve their work in some classes, but the practice of giving them opportunities to improve their work is not yet consistent across the academy.

The quality of teaching continues to improve because actions implemented before the last monitoring inspection are being built upon and consolidated. New staff have brought enthusiasm and strengths to teaching; they are having a positive impact on the progress students are making. Appropriate support for teachers is provided through a structured professional development programme. Performance management arrangements are increasingly robust. The academy is developing teachers' capacity while holding them to account for students' achievement with greater rigour.

Some inconsistencies in the quality of teaching remain. Students' progress is sometimes slowed because, on occasions, teachers miss opportunities to use students' responses to questions and tasks to improve their understanding and that of their peers. Although increasingly students are presented with appropriately challenging tasks, they are not then always taught the specific skills required for them to succeed in these tasks so as to achieve the best they can.

Where the quality of teaching is stronger, teachers use a variety of strategies, to lead learning and focus teaching sharply to develop on students' prior knowledge further and increase their understanding. For example, in a mathematics class the teacher developed students' mastery of expanding complex algebraic equations through targeted teaching of specific mathematical skills, high expectations and an in-depth knowledge of what students did or did not already know. Consequently, work in class and in students' books showed a rapid rate of progress over time.

Students with whom the inspector spoke, commented positively on and welcomed the increasing academic challenges placed upon them by the academy, along with higher expectations of good behaviour. There has been an apparent rise in students' aspirations and expectations of success.

According to the academy's data and the work seen in students' books, standards in English and mathematics in both Key Stages 3 and 4 have risen considerably since September 2014.

Curriculum provision for students in Key Stage 3 is improving because leaders' actions are eradicating previous inadequacies. For example, humanities subjects are now taught separately as geography, history and religious education. Consequently, students have a greater depth of learning for each individual subject. Students in Key Stage 3 commented positively on their new curriculum and the challenges it offers.

The behaviour of students continues to improve; their attitudes to learning are much more positive. Students are engaged in their lessons and are eager to learn. While some students report that in a few lessons there is some unruly behaviour, they say that this is dealt with immediately by teachers and leaders. There has been an increase in the number of students who are excluded from the academy as a result of leaders having higher expectations of students' conduct and refusing to tolerate behaviour that compromises students' learning or safety.

Attendance overall is improving, although boys and some pupils identified as having special educational needs have higher-than-average rates of persistent absenteeism. Leaders are taking action to address this, including exploring the use of alternative provision to match the curriculum to the specific needs of some pupils.

Measures to ensure that students are safe meet requirements.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Sharper use of data brought about by new senior leaders and the increased checking of their accuracy means that governors and senior leaders now have a more accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the academy on which to base actions to secure improvement.
- Leadership of the whole academy and of the English and mathematics departments has been strengthened.
- Leaders have made their values and expectations explicit.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- Strategies to improve the attendance of those who are persistently absent have not yet had sufficient impact on persistent absenteeism to close the gap with national averages.
- Not all teachers make best use of opportunities to use students' responses to advance learning or explain clearly what is needed to maintain a rapid pace of

learning.

- Marking and feedback in mathematics is not as well developed as in English.

External support

Continued partnership with St John Plessington Catholic College, an outstanding teaching academy, is used effectively by leaders to draw upon expertise to develop teaching and leadership. Furthermore, the University of Chester Academy Trust's support for the academy is good. Its work to secure the long-term placement of the executive Principal has resulted in significant strengthening of the academy's leadership team.