

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms Claire Charlemagne
Sandown Bay Academy
The Fairway
Sandown
Isle of Wight
PO36 9JH

Dear Ms Charlemagne

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Sandown Bay Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 12 November 2015, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. 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 second monitoring inspection since the academy was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in October 2014. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and the academy trust are not taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the last section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

Evidence

During the inspection, I met with you, senior leaders, staff, the Vice-Chair of the Management Board and representatives from the sponsor, the Academies Enterprise Trust. I spoke on the telephone to a representative from Hampshire local authority, the previous Principal and the Chair of the Management Board. I met with a group of pupils, accompanied a senior leader on visits to lessons and evaluated a sample of pupils' work. I discussed GCSE and A-level results from 2015 and the progress of current pupils. Other documentation related to behaviour, attendance, and pupils' progress and welfare was evaluated. I also scrutinised the academy's self-evaluation and recent work to improve teaching, learning and assessment.

Context

Since my previous visit you have been appointed as Principal. At the time of my visit, you had been in post for approximately eight weeks.

Main findings

The pace of improvement in the academy has been too slow. Recommendations made at the previous positive monitoring inspection visit in January 2015 have not been acted on urgently or sharply enough. There are lingering weaknesses in leadership and management, teaching, outcomes and behaviour that put the academy at risk of not being judged 'good' at its next inspection.

As the new Principal, you clearly demonstrate your whole-hearted commitment to the academy. You have planted firm roots on the island and very quickly won the confidence of staff, pupils and parents. You provided me with an honest appraisal of the academy's performance, and you have energetically set about tackling weaknesses and rising to the undeniable challenge of speeding up the pace of change. You and the academy trust are adamant that the academy will be judged 'good' at its next section 5 inspection. However, it was clear during this monitoring inspection that improvement has not been fast enough in order to assure this judgement.

Pupils' GCSE results in 2015 show an improvement compared with those from 2014. More pupils are achieving five GCSE grades at A* to C including English and mathematics. There are more pupils making expected and more than expected progress in English and mathematics. Teachers' predictions of pupils' results were more reliable in 2015 and matched their actual achievement more closely. Nevertheless, key groups of pupils identified at the section 5 inspection in October 2014 and at the monitoring inspection in January 2015 are still not performing as well as they should. You have correctly acknowledged that boys underachieve, particularly those who are disadvantaged. This was an area for improvement in the previous inspection and yet the gap between the achievement of disadvantaged pupils and that of other pupils has widened rather than narrowed, indicating that teaching is still not leading to better progress for these pupils.

A-level results for 2015 in Years 12 and 13 were disappointing in some subjects, including some unexpected 'U' grades for mathematics in Year 12. You have analysed the results and identified that weak teaching and curriculum planning led to gaps in pupils' knowledge and preparation for their A-level examinations. In addition, some experienced teachers of A level retired in 2013 and 2014. However, overall weaknesses in mathematics were identified at the section 5 inspection in October 2014, so it is a concern that after one year not enough has improved in this subject area at A level. You have commissioned support for mathematics and science from a mainland school with a successful sixth form programme. However, it is too early to judge the impact of this.

You have introduced better systems for establishing pupils' ability on entry to the academy and tracking their progress year by year, which has led to increased reliability of teachers' predictions. You are much more confident that when teachers evaluate progress during Key Stage 3 they do so accurately, and it is encouraging that pupils in Years 8 and 9 are now making more progress. In addition, the senior leader for pupils with special educational needs has sensibly overhauled the provision for pupils who have emotional and learning difficulties. However, senior leaders have not made sure that all teachers make effective use of assessment information when planning lessons. Nor are they measuring the success of initiatives introduced to improve teaching by their precise impact on pupils' progress in behaviour or learning. The academy is still at the stage of focusing on what teachers still need to do, rather than evaluating the impact their work is having on outcomes for pupils.

Examples of initiatives that are not improving outcomes quickly enough include the academy's focus on marking and feedback, which was introduced at the time of the previous monitoring inspection. Academy leaders have invested much time and resources in scrutinising teachers' feedback, and collecting and sharing examples of strong practice. This is a laudable approach and many pupils are now benefiting from the improved feedback they receive. Older pupils told me that they now had a much clearer idea about how well they are doing and what they need to improve. They appreciate all the guidance they receive. However, not enough is being done to link teachers' marking and feedback to the impact it is making on pupils' progress. Leaders track whether teachers are following the policy rather than checking that it encourages pupils to produce better work.

Behaviour and attendance continue to be concerns in the academy. Persistent absence of some pupils, although improved, is still higher than the national average for similar schools, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. You have wisely strengthened the team of staff who work with pupils who find good attendance difficult. Staff working in 'Wellbeing' provide strong and effective support for pupils whose circumstances make them most vulnerable. You are aware of the importance of ensuring excellent attendance for those pupils who are looked after by their local authorities, and your staff show determination and are able to provide a convincing account of exactly how much individual pupils' attendance and behaviour have improved. You are acutely conscious of the lack of resources on the island for those pupils who may require alternative education, and you have begun working more collaboratively with other schools to plan for this. However, in the meantime, there are still too many pupils who are not attending well, including some pupils who are disadvantaged and a few who are in local authority care.

Since taking up your post, you have taken a firm line with unacceptable behaviour, such as verbal abuse, swearing or persistent disruptive behaviour. You acknowledge that there has been an increase in the number of fixed-term exclusions this term while you establish a culture of high expectations. There are few repeat offenders, which is pleasing. Nevertheless, a firm line in itself is not enough to ensure that

behaviour is improving rapidly, and not all leaders or staff share your high expectations. While there has been an overall reduction in the number of fixed-term exclusions over the last two years, the numbers are still unacceptably high when compared with national figures, which raises concerns about the way the academy manages pupils' behaviour. There are remaining pockets of low-level disruption around the academy and unwelcome variations in behaviour from lesson to lesson. Some staff would benefit from more training and support with raising expectations and managing difficult behaviour more effectively.

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

External support

The academy trust successfully recruited you to the post of Principal and have ensured a smooth transition from the previous interim Principal, who provides continuing guidance and the benefit of his experience. The academy relies heavily on support from the trust and, to a lesser extent, on training and advice from Hampshire local authority. The trust has usefully commissioned an associate senior leader to support the academy with teaching and learning, and the use of information about pupils' progress. However this work is in its infancy and its impact has not been fully evaluated.

Trust leaders have an overgenerous view of the performance of the academy and the pace of improvement. This is because the trust does not routinely and objectively measure the success of its actions to improve the academy by the impact on pupils' progress and behaviour. For example, the trust commissioned some additional support for leadership in mathematics, but it is not clear exactly how this has benefited pupils or helped them to make more progress. Some strategies to support the academy do not have a sharp focus and because they are long term, do not drive urgent improvement. For example, networks formed with mainland schools enable you to share good practice, but it is not clear what the immediate aims are, how this will make a difference to the academy and how the impact will be measured. Planned actions to improve the academy focus disproportionately on what leaders and teachers will do, rather than on how well pupils are learning or behaving. There are crucial gaps in the support provided for the academy, including strategies to improve the management of behaviour and reduce the number of fixed-term exclusions.

I am copying this letter to the Chair of the Management Board, the Chief Executive of the Academies Enterprise Trust and the Director of Children's Services for the Isle of Wight. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Janet Pearce
Her Majesty's Inspector