



03 February 2006

Mr P Hullah
The Principal
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Dear Mr Hullah

ACADEMIES INITIATIVE: MONITORING VISIT TO NORTHAMPTON

Introduction

Following my visit with Mr C Chauhan HMI on 18 and 19 January 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring visit in connection with the academies initiative.

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Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents, and met with the principal, nominated senior and middle managers, groups of students and a representative from the DfES.

Context

The academy opened in September 2004 in the buildings of the predecessor school and in a neighbouring middle school that closed as part of the town-wide reorganisation to 11–18 education. The split site arrangement presented a considerable challenge during the first four terms. In January 2006, less than two weeks before the visit, the academy moved into its new buildings. The new accommodation is excellent. It provides a highly technological teaching environment with some superb facilities, particularly for information

and communication technology (ICT) and sport. The academy has a dual specialism in sport and in business and enterprise.

During its first year the academy faced significant staffing difficulties including a high turnover in teachers and changes in senior leadership. The principal and one vice principal left during the first year. Between June and November 2005 the academy was led by the vice principal. The substantive principal took up post in January 2006. The difficulties caused by the high turnover of staff have been exacerbated by considerable problems with staff recruitment. In addition, teachers with experience in just middle or upper schools had specific training requirements and needed time to familiarise themselves with new curricula.

There are 1298 students on roll, including 119 sixth form students. The academy serves an area that has high levels of social and educational disadvantage. The students are predominantly from White British backgrounds, although a small number are from minority ethnic groups. The proportion of students entitled to free school meals is very high. The proportion with learning difficulties and disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational need, is above average.

Achievement and standards

Although the attainment profile of each cohort is improving year on year, the students' standards of attainment on entry are low. The profile of the current Year 7 students is more broadly average although a high proportion of students enter the academy with low levels of literacy and numeracy.

In general the students make satisfactory progress although standards of attainment are low at each key stage. In 2005 the students' results in the national tests at the end of Key Stage 3 and in examinations at GCSE, AS and A level were below, or well below, average. However, the academy achieved most of its challenging targets and results represent satisfactory achievement for students overall.

Results in the end of Key Stage 3 tests in 2005 represent good achievement, given the context of the students. The proportion of students who achieved the expected Level 5 was 62% in English, 62% in mathematics and 57% in science. Although relatively few students achieved the higher Level 6 in English and science the academy achieved its targets in English and exceeded them in mathematics.

In the GCSE examinations in 2005 35% of students gained at least 5 A*–C grade GCSEs, a significant increase on those achieved by the predecessor

school. However, there was very wide variation between subjects. Moreover, only 18% of students achieved five higher grade GCSEs that included both mathematics and English and too few students progressed from higher levels in Key Stage 3 science and mathematics to higher grade GCSEs in those subjects. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities made good progress.

The academy makes good use of assessment data at a whole school level to monitor the students' progress and to set challenging targets. There is in place a systematic programme of half termly assessment. This helps to ensure that the students know what level they are working at, whether they are making progress against their targets, and what they need to do to improve. Students make satisfactory progress over time but the quality of learning is too uneven within and between lessons.

Personal development and well-being

The students' attitudes and behaviour in the lessons were at least satisfactory and sometimes good. Students settled quickly to their learning and some, but not all, were keen to answer questions in whole class discussions. They worked well with each other in pairs and in small groups and responded well to the activities. Most maintained their concentration on the tasks set and asked for help when necessary. However, the students were not routinely offered opportunities for independent learning by the teaching. Sometimes, they were expected to sit and listen to the teacher for a relatively long time which led to some disruptive behaviour by a few.

The academy has developed some good systems for students to take greater responsibility, for example, by acting as ambassadors for others and by the older students acting as mentors to the younger ones. Students said they were very pleased with the new buildings and facilities that the academy now offers them. They feel that they are treated fairly and that there is an appropriate balance between rewards and sanctions. They feel safe and know which adult to turn to for help and guidance should they require them.

The students are well behaved around the site at break and lunch times and in public areas such as the dining hall. In general they move sensibly and purposefully around the buildings. However, a few individuals are overly noisy or boisterous and the academy does not yet supervise the potential trouble spots. The academy's monitoring indicates that behaviour is improving. In the last calendar year 100 students, mostly boys, were temporarily excluded. In addition, a further 10 were permanently excluded. However, the academy has used a range of appropriate strategies to reduce these figures. In the autumn term 2005, for example, there were 30 fixed period exclusions

compared with 58 in the same period in 2004. The overall rate of exclusions is slowing down.

The academy has worked hard to improve its attendance rate. The rate for the year 2004–2005 was 88.2%, well below the 92.2% achieved by other secondary schools. However, this has improved markedly and the rate since September 2005 is 90.8%. This has been achieved by using a good range of strategies, including the closer involvement of outside agencies and parents. In addition, the academy has appointed two attendance officers who follow up absences promptly.

In general the students are punctual to their lessons. However, some loitered around in the communal areas, especially at the end of break and lunchtimes. They did not move swiftly enough and caused disruption to the learning of others when they arrived at their next lessons. Many staff are conscious of the need to set high expectations of the students' conduct around the building but some teachers are not sufficiently vigilant or punctilious in shaping or reinforcing high expectations.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved significantly since the academy first opened. During the first year many classes were covered by supply teachers but this problem has been addressed. Teaching is satisfactory overall with clear strengths but the proportion of good or outstanding lessons is too low. There are good relationships between adults and students and between the students themselves. Teachers have consistent approaches to planning and common expectations about the structure of lessons and the management of behaviour. In general lessons are well prepared and make good use of ICT to structure students' learning, which is suitably guided by specific objectives. In addition, lesson plans outline different outcomes which are sometimes linked with clear levels. However, planning rarely makes use of assessment data to target work or support to the specific learning needs of individual students or groups within each class. The support of teaching assistants is not sufficiently well planned.

Teachers have quickly acquired the necessary skills to use the interactive whiteboards. Many lessons were very well prepared with clever presentations but some of these were also a weakness of teaching because students were expected to watch and listen for too long without engaging in learning. The best lessons had the highest expectations of the students, planned in detail what students with different abilities would achieve, and tailored activities accordingly. When teaching was lively and engaging the students responded enthusiastically and worked hard.

Some weaknesses were common, even in lessons that were satisfactory overall. Too much teaching was dominated by teacher talk which, when questioning was weak, did too little to develop the students' understanding. Too many lessons did not consider how different students might learn most effectively and there was an imbalance between active and passive learning. Although students are assessed regularly and know what level they should achieve, marking was often perfunctory because it failed to indicate what students did well and what they needed to do to improve. In some lessons the teachers spent too much time managing behaviour rather than directing learning. When challenging behaviour was ineffectively managed the students did not make sufficient progress and the slow pace frustrated some students.

The quality of learning is satisfactory overall. However the progress that students make in lessons reflects variations in the effectiveness of teaching. Students made good progress when teaching was well paced and purposeful, but the quality of learning was too uneven, particularly when lessons were teacher centred or when behaviour was less well managed.

The academy has excellent facilities to develop its specialism in sport, including an all weather pitch, sports hall and dance studio. The students have two hours of PE each week and are offered a very wide range of sports clubs that are well supported. The specialism in business and enterprise is developed through the half termly enterprise days for all students. These are spent doing a range of different activities, working in teams in order to develop specific skills and experience in business and enterprise.

The academy curriculum has been suitably amended at the end of the first year and a further curriculum review has been initiated, based on widespread consultation. The teaching day has been cut to five hours for most students and the timetable sensibly restructured. Last year's Year 11 students took an average of 13 GCSEs. However, this has been reviewed to reduce the workload on staff and students with time now better targeted, for example on the successful completion of coursework. The small sixth form offers a suitable range of subjects although some courses have proved unsustainable, for example some science courses at A2 were dropped when too few students passed at AS level. Retention in the sixth form is lower than the national average.

Extracurricular provision is good. In addition to sports there is music, drama and dance, and the Duke of Edinburgh Award has been launched. Community provision has developed well.

Leadership and management

The academy's recent improvement has been achieved as a result of the clear strategic leadership and effective management of the acting principal. He quickly gained the trust and confidence of the staff and was thus able to implement a number of important and sensible changes. Following consultation the times of the academy day and the structure of the timetable were amended and a systematic cycle of self-evaluation was established. Since September the staff have been more cohesive, morale has improved, and there is greater consistency in teaching and more rigorous procedures for guiding and supporting the students. Analysis of assessment data and information from self-evaluation is beginning to be used to plan developments and strengthen provision. The academy development plan and curriculum action plans provide a sound basis for further improvement.

Despite a reduction in the senior management team since April 2005 the academy has effectively managed its development since then and has demonstrated its capacity for further improvement. The move into the new buildings was very well managed. Staff at all levels have made a good start in the new accommodation. The academy's self-evaluation is accurate and sensibly based on the newly developed quality assurance procedures. However, the cycle of curriculum reviews needs embedding and ought to involve all senior and middle managers. In addition, the role of the students needs development, for example, by developing a 'student voice'.

The quality and effectiveness of middle management is too variable. Although subject leaders take responsibility for managing their curriculum areas, the quality of subject leadership requires development. The leadership in some curriculum areas is not effective in raising standards because subject leaders do not take sufficient responsibility for evaluating or improving the quality of teaching and learning. Two external reviews, in mathematics and science, undertaken at the end of the autumn term make a very clear analysis of strengths, weaknesses and actions required.

The academy has been resourceful in addressing staffing difficulties. The significant problems with long term absence, recruitment and retention have been addressed. A carefully structured programme of training and support for those inexperienced in secondary schools, and new teachers to the academy, many of whom trained overseas, has been put in place. New staff spoke positively about the support that they had received.

External support

External support has been valuable during the academy's first year in adding capacity to the senior leadership team, notably in developing school self-evaluation, developing timetabling, and improving attendance. The academy values the support that it has received from a range of sources including the specialist schools trust, the DfES, external consultants and the sponsors, who have been able to provide specialist support, for example with curriculum reviews.

Main Judgements

After a difficult first year, the academy has addressed many of the challenging circumstances that threatened to undermine its development. There has been significant improvement in the students' attitudes, behaviour and attendance, and in the quality of teaching, as well as key changes to the curriculum. These have ensured that standards are rising and that the students make satisfactory progress. As the academy has developed parental confidence has increased and its popularity in the local area has grown. Now that it has moved into its new buildings it is in a good position to consolidate and accelerate its recent improvement.

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of learning for students of all abilities in lessons.
- Develop and make more effective use of the quality assurance procedures by fully engaging middle and senior managers in the process of self-evaluation.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Division at the DfES.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
HM Inspector of Schools