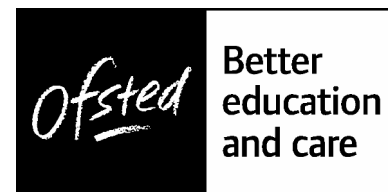


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30th November 2006

Mr Robert Dore
Principal
Unity City Academy
Ormesby Road
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TS3 8RE

Dear Mr Dore,

SPECIAL MEASURES: MONITORING INSPECTION OF UNITY CITY ACADEMY

Introduction

Following my visit with Jane Jones HMI, Elisabeth Linley HMI and Judith Straw and Peter McKay, Additional Inspectors, to your school on 28th and 29th November 2006, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the third monitoring inspection since the school became subject to special measures in March 2005.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, other senior leaders, teachers and school staff, groups of students, the chair of governors, the interim chief executive and director of education.

Context

A new principal took up post at the start of September 2006, together with a number of new staff including several in leadership roles. The level of staff turnover in the academic year 2005-2006 was about 23%, compared with 30% in the previous year. The academy was re-launched at the same time with a specialism in applied enterprise, supported by a DfES grant to fund a new enterprise centre and extended vocational opportunities within the curriculum. Substantial and successful

alterations have been made to the interior of the building to create a safer working and learning environment. Timetable changes include the introduction of a two-week cycle to improve flexibility and new lunch arrangements that have contributed to greater calm within the remodelled dining area. The interim chief executive and director of education continue to support the professional development of key staff and the implementation of the academy improvement strategy.

Achievement and standards

Compared with 2005, more students reached the standard that is expected of 14-year olds in the 2006 national tests in English, mathematics and science. There is a rising trend in mathematics, where the academy's challenging targets were exceeded. When their mathematics results from primary school are taken into account, students made good progress. Although there is an improving picture in English and science, too many students made slow progress across the three years of Key Stage 3.

At GCSE, a third of the students gained five or more A* to C grades. This is double the 2005 figure and is the academy's best set of results to date. These students achieved well in relation to their Key Stage 3 results. Progress was good in mathematics but in English about one quarter of the students were not entered for the GCSE. This affected the overall proportion of students gaining five or more A*-G grades, which held steady at 65%. About 14% of students gained no GCSEs, which is higher than in 2005. Some of these students received education elsewhere, such as at college or in work-based learning placements, but did not acquire nationally recognised qualifications. Overall, standards remain very low.

The academy has improved the quality of assessment information it gathers on students' progress and the standards they attain. Systematic analysis of the data shows that the academy has been most successful in increasing the progress of the more able students but concerns remain about the achievement of the less able, especially in English. The introduction of systems for the regular collection of data and its analysis is a positive feature of the improving leadership and management. A crucial next step is to adopt a more forensic approach to the interpretation of data to identify what is not working as well as it should, so that underlying reasons may be probed and actions for improvement taken.

Students made satisfactory progress in nearly three quarters of the lessons observed and good progress in about a fifth. When teaching is enthusiastic, challenging and well pitched, most flourish and are keen to learn. However, many students are not proficient at remembering previous learning and their lack of effective study skills and good work habits are disadvantages that sometimes prevent them from making the most of effective teaching. Weaknesses in literacy remain a major impediment to many students' progress. Teachers rarely modify materials to remove barriers and enable students to explore challenging topics and concepts.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- raise standards of attainment and increase the rate of progress that the pupils make in their learning – satisfactory progress

Personal Development and well-being

Behaviour is satisfactory. Behaviour around the academy has improved, although some younger students feel vulnerable at break and lunchtimes in the busy and noisy communal areas. Behaviour has also improved in lessons. The majority of students are willing to do as they are asked but a small minority in each year group sometimes disrupts lessons. The behaviour and attitude of older students have improved considerably. The new standards and expectations policy document lays down clear guidelines for what is expected in lessons but it is not yet consistently applied by all teachers and students. The number of exclusions has continued to fall dramatically over the last 12 months and the academy has developed good procedures for internal exclusion so that students use their time productively even when not attending mainstream classes. Students' attitudes to their education remain variable. Some enjoy lessons and are willing learners and the majority are at least compliant, but others lack enthusiasm and motivation.

Measures to improve attendance have been impressively effective. Attendance has improved overall by 10 percentage points since the time of the last monitoring visit. In Key Stage 3, it is 89% for the current academic year and is 87% in Key Stage 4. This shows very good improvement over nine months, although attendance remains well below the national average. Lesson registers and the reward system are having a positive impact, and improving attendance is an obvious priority within the academy. Students understand that they are expected to be in lessons, on time.

The academy programme is a well planned course for all students, including elements of healthy living, learning skills, citizenship, careers and enterprise education. Students enjoy these lessons. Since the previous monitoring visit the academy has increased provision for physical education and sporting activities and provided outside playing areas so there is now compliance with that aspect of the Every Child Matters agenda. The profile of the student council has been raised so that students not only feel they have a voice, but that their views are heard and duly considered.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- improve the behaviour and attitudes of the pupils, also addressing their attendance and punctuality – good progress

Quality of provision

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the academy has made considerable efforts to develop strategies for improving the quality of teaching and learning. Opportunities for professional development and more effective quality assurance procedures have been implemented. As a result, staff increasingly accept accountability for the quality of their own teaching and for their own responsibility for raising standards across the work of the academy.

The quality of teaching and learning is slowly improving. Although the overall proportion of satisfactory teaching remains broadly as it was at the time of the previous visit, satisfactory teaching is more secure than before and the proportion of good teaching has increased from one lesson in five to about three lessons in ten. A common format for planning has helped teachers to consider learning objectives and outcomes more carefully. The effectiveness of improved planning in meeting the needs of all students is reflected in the best lessons. However, this quality of provision is not consistent throughout the academy; for example, teachers do not modify students' work in lessons sufficiently often or systematically to ensure they can engage with tasks and so make good progress. In inadequate lessons, ill-matched work results in some students showing poor attitudes that teachers then find difficult to manage. Homework is not used consistently to promote students' learning beyond the school day. A gap remains between the quality of teaching and the quality of learning, in part reflecting weaknesses in students' literacy skills and study skills. The marking policy has been revised; close monitoring indicates that targets for the frequency with which work is checked have largely been met. Nevertheless, the quality of teachers' written comments remains variable. They do not always link the standard of work to levels or grades, nor do they offer sufficient subject-specific guidance on how students might improve their work.

The remodelled curriculum is better matched to the diversity of students' needs and the academy's specialist status. The 'bridge to achievement' strategy for vulnerable Year 7 students, who cope better with a reduced number of subjects and teachers, has been extended successfully into Year 8. Students in Years 9 and 10 have a broader range of options and the Year 10 curriculum has been extended by an increase in the number of vocational courses. Provision to engage students at risk of disaffection through a range of off-site, college and academy-based courses is expanding. It is too soon to assess the impact of all changes but the curriculum has the potential to motivate students and enable them to achieve well.

The effectiveness of the learning support team has been improved by creating clearly defined roles for its strategic leadership and operational management. Suitable accommodation for working with individuals and small groups of students has been provided. Curriculum changes allow staff to target more closely students with low levels of literacy and support those who need the security of contact with fewer teachers. Detailed information about learning needs, targets and strategies is compiled and made available to support subject teachers' lesson planning although the use made of this is not consistently good or productive. A group of gifted and talented students has been identified in each subject area but a programme of enriching and challenging activities has yet to emerge.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- improve the quality of teaching – satisfactory progress

Leadership and management

All stakeholders spoken to by inspectors are firmly of the view that the leadership and management of the academy have improved significantly in recent months. The

chief executive led the production of a detailed improvement plan during the early summer; this formed the basis for identifying a set of key indicators of performance on which members of the academy leadership team report to individual governors and which are then discussed by the full governing body. As this is a relatively new process, the sharpness of analysis and evaluation varies between reports, but they undoubtedly point to a significant shift in the expectations placed on senior leaders and on the development of clear lines of accountability throughout the institution. The director of education has initiated much valuable and productive work in developing the understanding and acceptance of authority and accountability amongst members of the academy leadership team. New middle managers appointed with a brief to oversee the work of key stages and subject areas have a pivotal role to play in the further development of this culture. The impact on teaching quality and raising standards has yet to be seen in consistently challenging teaching or better outcomes achieved by students, but the foundations for improvement have been laid.

The principal has an accurate view of strengths and weaknesses within the leadership team and of individual teachers. Sympathetic professional support has been offered where appropriate but senior leaders are now ready to take decisive action where necessary to eliminate the weak practice that continues to undermine their determination to improve standards. The visible leadership and optimism of the principal is regarded by many as the crucial element in restoring the self-esteem and confidence of the students and acceptance by the academy's external constituency. For example, relationships with local primary schools have been renewed and contacts with neighbouring academies are being pursued. Much creative energy has been put into the development and management of the academy's newly designated specialism although it is too early to see its impact on standards overall. The governing body discharges its duties effectively and is well equipped to ask searching questions about the academy's progress. Financial control and management are good.

There is no doubt that the academy has turned a corner in its efforts to improve. Overall, there is good capacity within the leadership to sustain this trend.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in March 2005:

- secure the permanent leadership of the academy and improve the overall quality of leadership and management at all levels – good progress
- continue to improve the finances of the academy – good progress. This area for improvement has now been fully addressed

External support

The academy has recovered well from a difficult financial situation and has prepared carefully costed plans for the new enterprise centre that will be funded by the DfES. Funding for recent building improvements and alterations has been used appropriately. Relationships with the local authority (LA) are productive in some areas; for example, the LA standards officer attends meetings of the governing body

to supply and discuss attainment data. However, there are issues to be resolved regarding off-site provision for some academy students. The academy benefits from the specific expertise of governors appointed by the sponsor.

Main Judgements

Progress since previous monitoring inspection – satisfactory

Progress since being subject to special measures – inadequate, although the rate of improvement has accelerated rapidly in recent months

Priorities for further improvement

- Clarify and analyse the outcomes of key indicators of performance to identify priorities for action.
- Make better use of assessment data to ensure appropriate targeting of work to meet all students' individual needs.
- Eliminate unsatisfactory teaching and continue to raise the proportion of teaching that is good or better.
- Implement the standards and expectations policy consistently.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the academy's adviser from the DfES.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Bennett
H M Inspector