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Mr Patrick Winston
Principal
St Paul's Academy
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Dear Mr Winston

ACADEMIES INITIATIVE: MONITORING VISIT TO ST PAUL'S ACADEMY

Introduction

Following my visit with David Jones HMI, Martyn Rhowbotham HMI, Michael Lynes HMI and David Hinchcliffe HMI to the academy on 31 October and 1 November 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.

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, senior leaders, other nominated staff and groups of pupils.

Context

St Paul's academy was created following the closure of St Paul's Catholic School and is based on the site of the former school. The former school accommodated 560 pupils and despite extending the accommodation using temporary classrooms the site is very cramped for the academy's 712 pupils. The academy draws pupils from a wide variety of backgrounds, with the percentage of ethnic minorities rising, particularly amongst the Black African sector. For example out of 180 students in Year 8, 116 are from ethnic minorities. Many students are socially disadvantaged, with the percentage of

high social class households in most local wards significantly below the national average. Around one in four pupils are eligible for free school meals and almost one in five are known to have a first language other than English. Although St Paul's Academy is a mixed school almost two thirds of the pupils are boys.

The academy has specialisms of Sports and Enterprise and has extended the school day so that pupils receive almost 29 hours tuition each week.

The most significant challenge facing the academy is the delay in moving to the Abbey Wood site, and uncertainties about when the transfer will take place, which is limiting development and placing unnecessary stress on staff and pupils.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good. Standards at the end of Year 9 and Year 11 are broadly in line with national averages. GCSE results in English, mathematics and science were in line with the picture found nationally, but those in music and French were considerably lower. The senior leadership team is fully aware of the reasons for these weaknesses and has good plans to address them. There is already evidence of some improvement in music this year. There are ambitious, but achievable, targets set for examination results over the next two years.

These results represent good progress for all pupils. This judgement is supported by both external data and evidence from the good systems that the academy uses to track and monitor pupil progress. Indeed, analysis of the 2006 GCSE results indicates that pupils make progress in the top 25% of all schools. Those with learning difficulties or disabilities make at least as good progress as other pupils.

This good progress by pupils has been made despite the significant challenges that the current accommodation presents.

Personal development and well-being

The very effective chaplaincy and student services team provide the key to the excellent provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of the pupils. Links with the parishes are strong and students

are involved in many charitable projects, including the support of a school in Kenya and other charitable work closer to home.

Despite the inordinately cramped and outdated accommodation, most pupils develop a healthy lifestyle because of the range of high quality sporting activities and the quality of meals provided by the popular and efficient canteen. However, the lack of onsite sports facilities which prevents pupils from taking a shower after physical activity is a concern to staff and pupils.

The pupils regard the academy as a safe environment and mutual respect is evident. There is little harassment in any form, because it is promptly and effectively addressed. Senior staff take a strong lead in developing initiatives for a safe and happy establishment. Child protection procedures are robust and rigorously applied. The vetting of staff and adults working with pupils is thorough.

There are opportunities for pupils to take responsibility in moulding the ethos of the academy. The School Council is active and developing further to give even greater pupil representation; pupils are pleased with the respect that senior staff give to their ideas. The recently introduced prefect system provides an opportunity to develop further pupil independence. The pupils' personal, social and health education has many strengths. However, pupils take the view that guidance on, for example, sex and drug education lacks coherence.

This is a very inclusive school; staff provide challenge, care and guidance to all. Academic and personal development is monitored very effectively, individual progress is tracked very carefully and personal targets are set for all pupils to achieve. Pupils said that the action taken by staff to support personal improvement was helpful. Staff know their pupils very well and a wide range of strategies is used to monitor the well-being and personal development of all individuals. Particular attention is given to supporting pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities, more vulnerable pupils receive extra support to raise their self-esteem and fully prepare them for adult life. Pupils are motivated by the will to learn and view the increasingly robust system of academic review and target setting as a positive aid to fulfilling their ambitions to succeed. Attendance is above average and exclusions are low.

Quality of provision

Teaching is good. Almost two thirds of the lessons observed were good or outstanding and there was very little that was inadequate.

The majority of lessons are well planned and carefully structured so that they contain a good range of innovative, interesting and challenging activities that pupils enjoy doing. Teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are high. Pupils respond well to this good teaching by working hard and making good progress. Pupils' attitude to learning is good and sometimes outstanding. Time in the most successful lessons is managed well by teachers and this leads to lessons having a brisk pace and a very purposeful atmosphere. Pupils learn a lot in these lessons and rightly have pride in their achievements. Punctuality to lessons is good.

Teachers' questioning is usually effective in checking pupils' knowledge, progress and understanding. Classroom management is good. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are supported well in lessons and make good progress. Pupils develop confidence in most lessons and talk articulately and enthusiastically about their work.

In the few lessons that were less productive, tasks set were often insufficiently challenging and expectations were too low. They lacked the brisk pace and focus on progress and achievement observed in the best lessons.

The curriculum is satisfactory and is based largely on the national curriculum. It meets adequately the needs of most pupils but there is no core provision of physical education (PE) in Year 11. Due to a lack of space and facilities many PE lessons take place off site and valuable learning time is lost in travelling to a range of venues. Showering facilities at the academy are inadequate.

The curriculum and timetable are planned imaginatively and this allows most pupils to follow courses that are appropriate to their needs. However, restrictions imposed by the academy's accommodation and lack of space mean that the range of courses available is relatively narrow. For example, there is only a small amount of vocational provision, although plans are at an advanced stage for the introduction of a course in travel and tourism.

The curriculum does allow pupils, where appropriate, to take end-of Key Stage 3 tests in Year 8 and then begin their GCSE studies in Year 9. This new initiative has been successful. There are also opportunities for some pupils to take a small number of GCSEs in Year 10 and then take a further associated GCSE in Year 11. For example, pupils may take, where appropriate, GCSE art in Year 10 and then GCSE textiles in Year 11. A small number of pupils take AS levels in critical thinking in partnership with a local sixth form college. There are some opportunities for pupils to gain experience of vocational training in partnership with a local college of further education and with local employers through a well managed work experience programme.

There is a satisfactory range of extra curricular activities and clubs. The PE department has been very proactive in developing an exciting range of activities and clubs including golf, dance, women's football and Gaelic football.

Leadership and management

The principal and his senior leadership team provide outstanding leadership for the academy and are well supported by the heads of learning zones. He has communicated a clear vision and high aspirations to the staff and pupils and there is a sharp focus on improving the quality of learning. He has been decisive and robust in tackling difficult issues and imaginative use has been made of the limited accommodation and facilities to provide a good quality of education. Effective systems for self evaluation give senior managers an accurate overview of the strengths and weaknesses, but the academy recognises that further development of self-evaluation across all levels of management is a priority. Information is used well to identify priorities for improvement and the progress made in addressing areas of weakness demonstrates a good capacity for further improvement.

External support

The academy has strong and productive links with the LA and a school improvement partner is working with the academy to evaluate its work and corroborate its judgements. Productive links with the local community and with local schools are developing, especially in the area of sports which is one of the academy's specialisms.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Continue to develop a broad and balanced curriculum so that it meets the needs and aspirations of all pupils.
- Develop an effective cycle of self-evaluation that includes leaders and managers at all levels throughout the academy.

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

Yours sincerely

Robert Ellis
HM Inspector of Schools