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Mrs Catherine Shaw
Principal
John Madejski Academy
Hartland Road
Reading
RG2 8AF

Dear Mrs Shaw

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to John Madejski Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Maria Dawes HMI to your academy on 21 and 22 November 2007, 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 and some other senior leaders, and with groups of staff and students.

Context

The John Madejski Academy is an 11-18 co-educational secondary school created in September 2006 following the closure of its 11-16 predecessor, Thamesbridge College. It is a specialist sports college. The academy is smaller than the average secondary school. The student population is stable and increasing in number: whilst the numbers of students in Years 9 to 11 are relatively small, the school recruited to its planned admission number of 180 into the current Year 7 and close to this in Year 8. The sixth form has recruited low numbers, 29 to date. The academy wishes to grow the sixth form slowly and concentrate on developing the quality of its provision.

There are roughly twice as many boys as there are girls. The percentage of students eligible for free school meals, at 32%, is well above average. The proportion of

students from minority ethnic backgrounds is about a fifth: this is above average, but few students are at an early stage of learning English. The percentage of students with learning difficulties or disabilities, and the percentage of these with statements of special educational needs, are both well above the national average. The academy has a full complement of permanent staff, roughly half of whom transferred from the predecessor school.

Achievement and standards

The prior attainment of students on entry has been low and heavily skewed towards the lower attaining third of students nationally. Students who completed Year 11 in 2007 joined the predecessor school with the lowest attainment in the country. Relatively few students join with above expected levels of attainment in English, mathematics or science. Throughout the academy, standards of literacy are particularly low and the academy is fully aware of the pressing need to raise these so as to improve students' capacity to learn in all areas of the curriculum and to raise overall standards. Standards of reading, writing and speaking are low. Standards of listening are also low but clearly improving alongside other improvements in students' personal qualities and attitudes to learning. Students are attentive but the speed with which they grasp the depth of meaning in what is being presented is very variable; teachers show an acute awareness of this and, where necessary, use methods that recap and reinforce learning to speed up students' progress.

The academy's first set of results in national tests and examinations in 2007 show an improvement on those of the predecessor school. Standards are still exceptionally low. In the end of Year 9 tests in 2007, in English, nearly a half of students gained Level 5 or higher; in mathematics and science, it was roughly six in ten and four in ten students respectively. Taking account of the students' academic starting points and other factors, progress from Year 7 to Year 9 is now broadly average. In GCSE examinations, the academy was understandably pleased with the outcome of 30% of students gaining five or more grades A*-C. The outcome of only 7% of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A*-C including English and mathematics shows that much still remains to be done to lift overall standards. Achievement, when looking at those students who took GCSE or equivalent examinations in 2007, was significantly lower than average overall. Girls achieved better than boys. The achievement of lower attaining students was generally the weakest and many of the academy's middle and higher attaining students did relatively well. Based on current work seen in lessons and on the academy's own records, achievement is showing signs of increasing considerably, in reading for example, because of improvements to the overall quality of educational provision, and particularly to teaching. Students themselves speak of how their progress has improved since transferring to the academy. They add that their predicted grades have gone up. The academy is ambitious and has set itself challenging targets alongside a determination that students should achieve well across a suitably wide range of subjects or areas of study.

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour and attitudes to learning have improved significantly since the academy opened and students consider that this has enabled them to make better progress. Exclusions have reduced in the last year and behaviour is consistently good both in lessons and around the site. Students are respectful to staff and each other. Attendance has continued to improve and is now satisfactory except in Year 11 where it is lower than that found in the rest of the academy.

The house system is central to students' personal development and increased levels of self-esteem. House assemblies and house time help students to develop their understanding of spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues. The academy promotes a culture of achievement and students enjoy the opportunities to celebrate things that they have done well. They are very proud of the academy's specialism in sport, and most take full advantage of the enhanced sporting facilities and opportunities available to them.

Students say that they feel safe in the secure and well ordered site. Systems to deal with the few incidents of racism or bullying are swiftly, consistently and effectively applied. Students have many opportunities to take positions of responsibility in the academy including being peer mentors, reading coaches and prefects. There are active house councils and 'Student Voice', the academy's student council, works with enthusiasm to contribute to school improvement.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall and, because of this, students are being helped to catch up on past underachievement. The academy has a very secure and accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement of both individual teachers and departments, arising from a comprehensive programme of monitoring, evaluation and review. Effective professional development is in place for whole-school, departments and individuals, and key to this are lead-teachers and the recently created 'dare-devils' with the remit of developing and disseminating innovation in learning.

Lessons are characterised by good planning leading to a prompt start and the use of a variety of teaching techniques, including the good use of information and communication technology (ICT). Staff and students have high expectations of what can be achieved and students are mostly keen to participate and learn. They particularly enjoy the use of ICT to extend and enhance their learning. A key strength of lessons is the strong relationships and mutual respect evident between staff and students. In some lessons, skilled questioning elicits understanding and requires students to expand their ideas at length but, in most others, students give short answers and not in great depth. Whilst there are some examples of excellent practice, not all teachers fully understand yet how to promote literacy skills or how to support students with low levels of literacy.

Teachers find many opportunities in lessons to provide helpful feedback to students. Students know the levels they are working at and most know what they need to do to improve. Assessment information is used well and provides students and parents with useful information about students' progress.

Progress in developing the curriculum is good. The academy sees current and future improvements to the curriculum as key factors in raising attainment and in further fostering students' desire to learn. Innovative and radical changes to the curriculum proposed for next year are intended to offer students a wider range of vocational and academic learning opportunities in addition to personalised programmes. From January 2008, all students will work towards an Academy Diploma that will reflect the development of various personal qualities, as well as their gains in knowledge, skills and understanding.

Intensive support is being provided for those students with the lowest levels of literacy with a view to enabling them to access the entire curriculum more readily. Provision for modern foreign languages is currently very limited whereas for ICT it is good. Provision in sport is excellent. It has a positive impact on students' personal qualities and self-esteem, and promotes a sense of community. All students take part in at least one of the many available enrichment activities.

Students are well cared for and the needs of individuals are identified clearly. Intervention is swift where necessary. There is an extensive multi-agency team of key workers, supporting students experiencing academic, personal and emotional difficulties. Learning co-ordinators, who hold responsibility for houses, with tutors, are effective in monitoring students' progress and in informing parents and carers about their children's progress. Good procedures exist to safeguard the well-being and safety of the students.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are strong, resolute, visible and effective in all parts of the academy. The principal has been hugely instrumental in setting a positive and trenchant approach to improvement. One member of staff, echoing the sentiments of others, said of the principal, 'She challenges me all the time, I feel heard and am now valued.' Staff are clear about what accounts for the academy's successful start. They have built a very secure platform for raising standards. The principal's belief that all staff play a shared and vital role in leadership and management is demonstrated clearly in the confident contributions that staff of all types are making to improving primarily the quality of teaching and learning, and to the curriculum.

Students talk not only of their pleasure in working in a splendid new building but also of the way in which expectations of their work, attitudes and behaviour have been lifted and how they have risen to them. Staff and students are complimentary about how the move to the new building was managed. With further work still being undertaken to complete the site and recreational areas, the atmosphere is calm, orderly and the future viewed very positively.

Systems for compiling, managing and using data have been greatly improved and play a significant part in boosting students' progress. Staff and students have access to pupils' personal details: their attendance, attainment records, academic targets and points awarded as part of the system of rewards and sanctions. The academy plans to suitably extent access to parents. Students regularly and keenly view their own 'pages' of information on the many available computers to keep a check on their progress.

Staff feel very well supported by the two main management structures of subject directorates and house teams. They also value the way of working in 'Pod' teams of colleagues from a range of subject areas. These structures have enabled staff to confer easily, forge links between subjects, address school issues in cross-curricular ways, and share good practice.

A key and positive feature of the academy's work to raise standards is in relation to educational inclusion. Staff are impressive in the way that they seek to understand each student's needs, identify any barriers to learning, and work to remove them, whatever they are and wherever possible. Weaknesses in students' literacy skills are chief amongst these barriers to learning and the academy has mounted a campaign, including the work of 'literacy champions' from across the directorates, to improve matters. Whilst much good work is being done to lift standards in literacy, there is a need to ensure greater consistency in the way that staff take every opportunity to tackle this issue.

The sports specialism is rightly acknowledged by staff and students to be a significant strength of the academy and it features greatly in the daily life of it, in lessons and in the many enrichment and extension activities.

Governors, in the words of the principal, 'are highly skilled people who pose challenging questions as well as providing tremendous support'. They are well organised and keep a close eye of the progress of the academy. The main sponsor is a known presence to students who speak with pride about his involvement with them in many ways, including the role he plays within the academy's reward system.

External support

After just over a year, the academy is showing a good capacity to raise students' attainment, both within the academy and in the local area. The academy is central to the work of the Whitley Excellence Cluster of schools in developing locality initiatives for raising standards and improving learning in the wider community, in the recent 'Family Learning Week', for example. Partnerships with Thames Valley University are being developed and strengthened as are those with other schools in Reading, both maintained and in the independent sector. The academy values the support of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in developing leadership and management skills, for example. The links with Reading Football Club bring many advantages that are of mutual benefit.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure greater consistency and speed in the work undertaken to raise students' standards in literacy.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF.

Yours sincerely

Wiola Hola
Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools