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Mrs Louise Ceska
Principal
St Marks Church of England Academy
Acacia Road
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Dear Mrs Ceska

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to St Marks Church of England Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Robin Hammerton, HMI to your academy on 31 October and 1 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, other key staff, groups of students, governors and representatives of the sponsors.

Context

St Marks is a Church of England academy and specialises in science, technology and enterprise. It was designated for an accelerated opening in September 2006. Due to the postponement in confirming the opening date, caused by a Judicial Review, there were delays in finalising staff appointments and in carrying out improvements to buildings. The academy is currently fully staffed, but about a tenth of teaching staff are on temporary contracts. Staff turnover is high: about a quarter of the teaching staff have left since the academy opened. The senior leadership team (SLT) has only recently been at full strength.

The academy serves a community that experiences significant socio-economic deprivation; almost a third of students are eligible to claim free school meals, nearly three times the national average. Significant numbers of students either leave or join the academy during the academic year. A high number of those joining arrive with low levels of English language proficiency.

There are 807 students on roll, including 58 in the newly opened sixth form. About one third of students are from White British backgrounds, a quarter are of Black heritage, and a fifth are from Asian backgrounds; about a tenth are at the early stages of learning English. Approximately a third of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, which is well above the national average; and the number with statements is slightly above the national average.

Main Judgements

The principal, with the full support of the recently constituted SLT, governors and sponsors, has worked tirelessly to establish a real sense of community, founded on the academy's Christian ethos. Their commitment to making the academy a success is not in doubt. Students are very appreciative of the more consistent routines and higher expectations of behaviour. As a result students' behaviour and attitudes have improved and students feel more secure. However, the senior leadership team has not yet demonstrated the same capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This is the key reason why standards remain low and why the academic progress of too many students is inadequate.

The academy has therefore made inadequate progress towards raising standards. This visit has raised serious concerns about the standard of education provided by the academy and I am recommending a return visit.

Achievement and standards

Standards are exceptionally low, and achievement is inadequate. This is demonstrated by examination results, evidence of student progress provided by the academy, and the quality of students' work seen during this visit.

Results in the 2007 Key Stage 3 tests were significantly below the national average, and below the agreed targets in English and mathematics, but slightly above the target in science. The number of students achieving at least five A*-C grades at GCSE was well below the agreed target. The academy's own analysis suggests that only just over half the students who could have achieved five higher level GCSEs in 2007 did so. The academy's own monitoring shows that students underperformed in science, technology, information and communications technology (ICT), humanities and modern foreign languages. There is some evidence to suggest that extra-curricular activities and setting arrangements are supporting the more able students to make better progress.

The targets set by the academy for the current academic year are not sufficiently challenging. Were the academy to reach these targets, standards at both Key Stage 3 and 4 would still remain exceptionally low. At the time of the visit the academy was

unable to provide secure information on the current progress of students in Years 9 and 11. Although there are now satisfactory systems in place for collecting information on student progress the resulting data are not yet analysed on a regular basis and are not well enough understood by either students or teachers.

Personal development and well-being

Students' behaviour and attitudes to learning are consistently satisfactory and sometimes good. The academy has good evidence of the rapid improvements in these areas, which are underpinned by its Christian ethos. Students are mindful of each other's needs and generally behave courteously and safely. They have good opportunities to contribute to the life of the academy. The student council is becoming well-established and influential, with students themselves taking responsibility for setting the agendas and producing minutes. Many Year 10 students have been trained as 'Big Brothers' and 'Big Sisters' to help younger students. Extra curricular activities, including the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, are making strong and increasing contributions to students' well-being. Students clearly notice that the academy is developing a strong sense of community to which they are pleased to belong. Exclusions, both permanent and fixed term, are low. Attendance has improved and is now satisfactory.

Quality of provision

Teaching and learning are inadequate. During the visit, ten parts of lessons were observed; one was outstanding, one was good, four were satisfactory and four were inadequate. Behaviour in lessons has improved significantly and is consistently satisfactory when teaching is satisfactory. Although this has created a much better climate for learning, students' progress remains too slow. This is because teachers' expectations of what the students can do are often too low. Work is not consistently well-matched to the needs of particular students because staff are not sure enough how to use the assessment data which is now increasingly available to them.

Lessons generally proceed at a reasonable pace, relationships are good, and the topics chosen interest the students. However, in too many lessons students are not clear enough about what is expected of them, and the activities and resources are mundane, which can lead to their attention wandering. Teachers often make insufficient checks in the lessons that the students understand well enough what they are supposed to be learning. Marking is often cursory, and other forms of feedback to students do not sufficiently help them to see how they can improve their work.

The curriculum is appropriate. It has been thoughtfully constructed and enriched at all key stages. In Key Stage 3, students benefit greatly from a regular and very varied programme of enrichment lessons. This significantly enhances their motivation and enjoyment of school, as well as their social skills. In Key Stage 4, the academy provides a good range of courses, including several vocational options. Visitors to the academy significantly enhance the curriculum; for example, in the area of sexual health. The new sixth form curriculum is broad and carefully matched to the needs

and aspirations of the students who appreciate what is on offer. For example, the provision in art, including links made with other providers, is impressive and developing very well.

The care and personal support provided to students are satisfactory. The academic guidance provided to them is inadequate. Although students now have personal academic targets, they are not sure what they need to do to achieve them. Year 11 students report that they do not have enough guidance about their future options.

Leadership and management

The principal, with the full support of the SLT, has worked very hard to secure a distinct improvement in the behaviour and attitudes of students. This is recognised and valued by both the students themselves and the local community. However, the senior leaders do not have an accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning. They have a more positive view of its quality than either examination outcomes or evidence from this visit demonstrates. They have, however, challenged some individual instances of poor teaching and taken robust action to improve it. Nevertheless, monitoring of teaching and learning is not done in a way which identifies and deals with underperformance quickly and consistently across the academy. Neither are the better systems for monitoring progress used systematically and rigorously to identify students who are in danger of underachieving. Middle leaders generally have an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of their department. However, they are not yet capitalising on improved behaviour and better systems for tracking student progress to raise standards.

The quality of the SLT's evaluation of the work of the academy is not always secured by reference to robust evidence. The academy's development plan does not clearly demonstrate who is accountable for monitoring and evaluating specific aspects, neither does it indicate key milestones. It does not set out specific actions for securing rapid improvements to the quality of teaching or raising standards.

Governors and sponsors have worked hard to ensure an improved relationship with the local community. They are absolutely committed to improving the life chances for the students at the academy. They carry out their statutory duties and responsibilities appropriately and are very supportive of the principal. However, they do not have an accurate picture of academic standards at the academy and are therefore unable to offer the SLT the support and challenge that is necessary to ensure rapid progress.

External support

The academy benefits from its relationship with sponsors, which has had a direct impact on improving the ethos of the academy. The experiences provided by sponsors have enabled students to feel ready to take more responsibility and they talk very positively about them. The academy has received both good support and challenge from its school improvement partner.

Priorities for further improvement

- the quality of teaching and learning
- the rigour of the SLT's evaluation of teaching and learning
- the monitoring of students' academic progress
- planning for improvement so that it focuses on the key priorities to support rapid progress in raising standards.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Lynes
HM Inspector of Schools