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Mr Keith Miller
Acting Principal
Burlington Danes Academy
Wood Lane
London
W12 0HR

Dear Mr Miller

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Burlington Danes Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Mary Massey HMI to your academy on 4 and 5 March 2008, 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 acting principal, the principal designate, other senior staff, groups of students and representatives of the sponsors.

Context

The academy opened in September 2006 with the sponsorship of ARK, 'Absolute Return for Kids', a charity committed to giving students from socially deprived inner city communities access to high quality education and achievement. The academy is built on the values of the Church of England and maintains its partnership with the London Diocesan Board. It specialises in mathematics and arts and was recently awarded Sportsmark status.

There are 779 students on roll. There are a high number of surplus places which make the academy vulnerable to casual admissions throughout the year. Students come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds; the largest being of Black Caribbean and Black African heritage. About a third of students speak English as an additional language; very few are at the early stages. Approximately two fifths of students are

eligible for free school meals, which is about three times the national average. The number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of educational need, is similar to that found nationally.

The founding principal left at the end of the last academic year; since then a vice principal has successfully led the academy in an acting capacity. A highly experienced principal, with a strong track record of school improvement, has been appointed and will take up her post shortly after this visit. She has visited the academy regularly over the past term and her views have contributed to this monitoring visit.

A larger number of staff than is typical left the academy last year, but it is now almost fully staffed. However, as a result about a quarter of teaching staff are inexperienced and consequently require significant support. The achievement of students last year was inadequate and there were an extremely high number of fixed term exclusions, largely due to inappropriate and disruptive behaviour. The academy attributes these difficulties to the problems caused by the reorganization of the faculty structure.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards. This visit has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the academy's performance will be monitored.

Since the acting principal took up post in September 2007 the academy has made satisfactory progress in improving behaviour and attendance. Students clearly recognise this and consistently told inspectors of the improvements they had seen this year. They were particularly complimentary about the acting principal and the quality of teaching in mathematics. However, they also recognised that there is more to do, particularly in ensuring that poor behaviour does not impede learning.

Because of the robust action by sponsors, largely accurate self-evaluation, and the improvements to behaviour and attendance the academy has demonstrated satisfactory capacity to improve. This is fragile and needs to be both carefully nurtured and rigorously monitored. Inspectors share the confidence of sponsors and senior leaders that the academy is now well placed to make the necessary rapid improvements.

Achievement and standards

The academy rightly judges that standards were low and achievement inadequate last year. Senior leaders attribute this to the difficulty of maintaining clear lines of accountability and communication through the new faculty structure. Whilst this was certainly a contributory factor, a more fundamental reason is the low expectations of student achievement. During this visit progress seen during lessons varied considerably because a number of lessons were based on an inaccurate understanding of students' achievement, prior knowledge and potential.

The academy was able to provide satisfactory evidence that standards are likely to be better than last year for students in Year 11. This will represent satisfactory progress from their starting points in Year 7, but will be unsatisfactory from their good achievement in Year 9. The academy's assessment data indicates that students make good progress in mathematics and at least satisfactory progress in English. Progress in mathematics is good throughout the academy.

Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities do not make as much progress as their peers in Years 7 – 9, and the academy was unable to provide any evidence on the current progress of those in Year 11. The progress of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is inadequate.

Personal development and well-being

The academy had serious concerns about attendance and behaviour last year and has rightly taken urgent, effective action. It introduced robust systems to improve behaviour and as a result the number of fixed term exclusions has fallen significantly. The behaviour seen during this visit was largely satisfactory. Students recognise that their behaviour has improved since last year because teachers are now implementing behaviour management strategies far more consistently. However, they report that a significant proportion of their lessons are affected by low-level disruption.

Attendance last year was inadequate. The academy rightly took urgent action to remedy this and immediate steps are now taken on the first day of absence. Students report that this had a positive impact both on their attendance and punctuality. As a result attendance is currently improving, and if the current trend continues it will be satisfactory by the end of the year. There remain inconsistencies during the day as a number of students are late to the start of lessons and some teachers do not routinely take registers.

Quality of provision

The overall quality of teaching and learning seen during this visit was satisfactory. It varied from outstanding to inadequate, but in the main satisfactory lessons were observed.

The outstanding lesson in mathematics was based on strong subject knowledge and thoughtful planning related to students' prior knowledge and needs. The teacher used highly skilled questioning to include all students and to make them really think hard. In mathematics students are given very thorough oral and written feedback which makes explicit what they need to do to improve. As a consequence, students really enjoy mathematics and make good progress. A similar level of intellectual challenge was observed in an English lesson where the teacher expertly engaged students in an analytical discussion. The quality of academic guidance in this lesson was not as good as in mathematics so progress was only satisfactory. In a number of lessons opportunities to extend and challenge students were missed because of low expectations and weak planning.

The quality of teachers' assessment has been a priority for their professional development this year. Good practice was evident in mathematics but it is variable in other subjects because it is dependent upon the approach of individual teachers. This is because of the variable quality of monitoring by middle leaders.

The in-class provision for those students with specific learning needs is inadequate. They are not effectively supported by enough trained staff, neither is their progress tracked. This situation has occurred due to long-term instability in the leadership of the special needs department. There is an extensive literacy and numeracy development programme at Key Stage 3. However, it is ineffective because it is not sufficiently well aligned with the main curriculum or students' needs.

Leadership and management

The acting principal, with the active support of sponsors, has taken action on the most urgent issues hindering the progress of the academy. In the short time he has been in post he has ensured that behaviour and attendance have improved. Students are appreciative of this and like his approachable style. He and the principal designate have worked together in a highly professional manner which is ensuring a stable period of transition for students and staff.

Strategic planning has been sensibly focussed on the most immediate priorities and outcomes are regularly reviewed. However, it has yet to have a significant impact on raising standards. The development of the academy has been hampered by the duplication of responsibilities and accountabilities at senior level. This has led to confusion for both students and staff. Middle managers are unclear about their role in improving the quality of teaching and learning. Consequently, there are inconsistencies in the monitoring of assessment, tracking of students' progress, and the quality of academic guidance.

The academy has a clear picture of its strengths and weaknesses because it has an honest approach to self-evaluation. However, it overestimates the quality of teaching. Although senior leaders judge the quality of individual lessons accurately they do not sufficiently relate the overall quality to academic outcomes for students. Their progress is not sufficiently well tracked for the leadership team to have a completely accurate view of current achievement, particularly in Year 11.

External support

The academy benefits from a wide range of support and consultancy, in particular the robust and realistic support provided by the sponsors' director of education.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise teachers' expectations of student achievement so that the quality of teaching and learning improves
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of all managers so that they are sharply focussed on raising standards

- Make effective provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities so they make at least comparable progress to their peers

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Lynes
HM Inspector of Schools