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Mr S Topper
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Dear Mr Topper

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Sandwell Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Heather Weston HMI to your academy on 16 and 17 June 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the 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 headteacher, groups of students, the chair of governors and a representative of the sponsors.

Context

Sandwell Academy opened in September 2006. It admits students from across Sandwell. Currently the academy has Year 7, 8 and sixth form students and aims to be full by September 2010. The academy's specialisms are Sport and Business which have high profiles in the curriculum. The timetable for the day is innovative, starting at 8.30am and extending until 4pm for students, except on Friday when it is 3.20pm. On four days of the week, Monday through to Thursday, students have the opportunity to get involved in an extensive range of extra curricular activities. The academy works in close partnership with Thomas Telford City Technology College (CTC) and two other academies in the West Midlands.

There are 719 students on roll approximately half of this number being in the sixth form. The student population is diverse, with approximately half being White British and others coming from a number of minority ethnic groups. The academy's admissions arrangements determine that students of all abilities are admitted. The proportion of students identified as having learning difficulties or/and disabilities is much lower than the national average.

Achievement and standards

The average attainment of students currently in Year 7 was above average when they joined the academy in September 2007. This was also the case for the current Year 8, although the difference was less significant. The academy does not yet have any national test or examination results and so relies on its own assessment data to measure standards and the amount of progress that students make. Although there is a growing amount of assessment data available, staff have not evaluated in any real depth the achievement of cohorts or groups of students, including those from minority ethnic groups. Much of the work done with data is simplistic and linked to targets set, whilst missing what is happening along the way in terms of the achievement of groups of students.

During the visit staff calculated in more detail the progress that Year 8 students have made from September 2007 to early April 2008 when students took their mock exams in English and mathematics. This data highlighted that approximately a fifth of students had made no demonstrable progress during that period. Academy data for science presented to inspectors indicated that just over a third of students had made no demonstrable progress in the first term of this academic year. Considering the academy's targets for student progress, a significant number of students had some way to go to achieve their targets, let alone the higher aspirational target set by the academy of one national curriculum level in one year. However, the most recent teacher assessments undertaken in May 2008 suggest that there has been a significant improvement in the rate of progress students made. On the basis of the May 2008 assessment the senior management team is confident that Year 8 students have made good progress and are now already attaining standards expected at the end of Year 9.

Academy assessment data to track the progress made by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) and those with a statement of special education need has not been evaluated in detail. Staff report that the impact of intervention strategies becomes more evident in Year 8 than Year 7. One reason given for some Year 7 LDD students making limited progress was that their starting points were lower than those in Year 8, although this is not supported by evidence. Almost 40% of students identified as having learning difficulties or disabilities in Year 7 joined the academy having attained the standards expected for their age. Whilst some LDD students have made satisfactory or better progress there remains a small minority who did not make enough progress in the first two terms of this year. Overall the effectiveness of provision is restricted because there is not an informed, evaluative overview of students' progress.

Standards students attain at the end of two years in the sixth form have yet to be measured by a set of examination results. Students who have joined the sixth form have to meet certain criteria which usually places them at an above average starting point. The academy is collating assessment data for the sixth form and evaluates that the progress towards academy targets is good.

Personal development and well-being

The vast majority of students enjoy being at the academy, as demonstrated by very high level of attendance and good punctuality, and they appreciate the facilities and opportunities provided. Students in Year 8 and the sixth form demonstrate a very positive attitude to learning, want to reach their aspirational targets and focus on their learning. Their behaviour is often good and good relationships exist both with other students and with adults. However, while the attitude of many students in Year 7 reflects this, there is a significant minority who do not behave well in lessons, they quickly lose concentration, talk to each other, and ignore the teacher. Although the academy has procedures for managing behaviour, these are not being used effectively by all teachers to address this behaviour, either in lessons or when moving about the academy.

Students say they feel very safe and know that any problems can be referred to their personal tutors. Sport is high on the agenda and the academy is successfully engaging students who formerly had a more negative attitude to sport.

Quality of provision

Academy monitoring indicates that the quality of teaching and learning is broadly satisfactory. The quality of teaching observed by inspectors was mainly satisfactory although it ranged from inadequate to outstanding. In some lessons low level disruption was not addressed effectively with the result that students did not make sufficient progress. In general, teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge. Lessons are carefully structured to enable students to develop skills and concepts and to practise these skills. Although plans identify what students are expected to learn, in most lessons students all carry out the same activities, which do not meet the needs of those with different abilities. Teachers make very good use of interactive whiteboards to engage students, and promote learning. Every opportunity is taken to develop literacy skills across the curriculum and in some lessons good opportunities are created to develop mathematical skills. In the best lessons the pace was brisk, and because of teachers' clear expectations and good opportunities to discuss their learning, students were fully engaged throughout. However in many lessons too little use was made of working with a partner or in groups to discuss and develop ideas or responses to questions, and students spent too much time listening to teachers or to other students giving answers. Teaching assistants often work well with students on a one-to-one basis and occasionally with small groups, but they are less effective in the parts of the lesson where teachers are working with the whole class. Whilst there were examples of well presented work in Years 7 and 8, much work was of poor quality and of a poor standard, and did not reflect the levels recorded on the report sheets.

Students are motivated by the fact that they are informed of the levels of their work in all subjects. Some teachers give students clear guidance as to how to improve, both when sharing the expected learning, and when marking their work, but this practice is not consistent and some students do not get sufficient guidance as to how to gain higher levels. Student attitudes in the sixth form are good and they respond well to the emphasis on encouraging them to be independent learners.

The curriculum aims to meet the needs of different groups of learners with due emphasis on developing the key skills of literacy, numeracy, information communications technology. There is a good focus on the specialist subjects, sport and business, and provision is enhanced by the good facilities.

Students appreciate the good pastoral support. Induction into both Year 7 and the sixth form is good, with an emphasis on team building. The vertically grouped personal tutor system encourages older students to support younger students by pairing them up with buddies and giving them responsibility for helping them during tutor sessions and, for some younger students, throughout the day.

Leadership and management

The close links with Thomas Telford CTC have supported the leadership and management of the academy. The headteacher is establishing ways of working at Sandwell, often replicating the Thomas Telford CTC model. Although the academy has put in place some initiatives of its own, it has not always rigorously evaluated the impact on students' achievement. As a result the academy has not tested out sufficiently that the provision it offers best suits the community of students at Sandwell. A lack of detailed critical evaluation prevents governors, who robustly act on information they have received, from holding the academy to account.

Deputy headteachers are clear about their role and responsibilities. Most have had experience of the Thomas Telford model of leadership and management and have used this to influence the way they work. There are effective systems in place to manage the academy, and regular senior management team meetings facilitate this. Minutes from senior management team meetings indicate that the evaluation of standards and achievement is not a prominent task for this group.

The academy development plan is clearly written and has measurable targets. At times, subject related progress reports are limited in detail. For example a judgement about the quality of teaching reported that most lessons are graded good or better without giving exact proportions. Another example concerns the reporting of mock Year 8 exams where a generalised judgment was made reporting good progress instead of detailing the range of progress students had made, including where it had been inadequate.

Monitoring the quality of teaching and learning is well established. Lessons are monitored regularly and staff are given detailed feedback with identified areas to improve. Although feedback is detailed it does not always concentrate on how well students learn in the lesson. Lesson observations undertaken by senior staff have

recently identified issues regarding students' off-task behaviour in lessons which is having a negative impact on student progress. Senior staff have taken action, and continue to do so, but this has not yet resolved these issues.

A high proportion of teaching staff are newly qualified teachers (NQTs) or in their second year of teaching. These staff receive regular monitoring and helpful advice on what to do to improve. They also benefit from working in large teaching areas where they can work alongside deputy headteachers. NQTs have opportunities to observe teaching at Thomas Telford CTC but have not always been given the chance to formally observe good teaching taking place at Sandwell Academy.

External support

The academy is receiving helpful support and challenge from the school improvement partner (SIP). The March 2008 report from the SIP was right to highlight the significant gap, at that time, between Year 8 standards and the target the academy had set for the end of the year whilst also recognising the appropriate support and interventions being used for students who were not achieving as well as they should have been. The SIP has also helped the academy to have a more realistic view about the academy's capacity to improve which had been judged to be outstanding and has now been moderated to good. The support from Thomas Telford CTC has already been noted and there is additional helpful joint support and working relationships with two other academies.

A number of strong business links are fostered which provide opportunities for students to find out about local business. The academy purchases consultancy from Warwickshire Local Authority to support and improve the provision for LDD students.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that the work of the academy is more rigorously monitored and evaluated in order to inform further improvement.
- Set up a system for analysing student progress data in order to identify where action needs to be taken to improve provision.
- Ensure that behaviour is effectively managed and systems are sufficiently proactive to address and support students' behaviour as the academy grows in size.
- Ensure that further action is taken to share best practice in teaching in order to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Andrew Cook

Andrew Cook HMI

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF