

21 May 2008

Mr D Berry  
Principal  
The Barnsley Academy  
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Dear Mr Berry

## Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to The Barnsley Academy

### Introduction

Following my visit with John Rutherford HMI to your academy on 19 and 20 May 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.

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### Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work including 15 part lessons, two registrations and one assembly; scrutinised documents; and met with the principal and senior leaders, nominated staff, groups of students and the chair of governors.

### Context

The Barnsley Academy opened in September 2006 in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. Its new building is due to open in February 2009. It is much smaller than average with 434 students on roll, including 41 in the sixth form. The area served by the academy is one of significant social and economic disadvantage: a well above average proportion of students is eligible for free school meals. Almost all students are White British. Eight students are refugees or asylum seekers and five are at the early stages of learning English. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above average and the number with a statement

of special educational needs is above average. Many more students join and leave the academy other than at the usual points in time. There is a full complement of staff. The academy has specialist status for science. It has gained Sportsmark recognition and Healthy Schools status.

### Achievement and standards

The standards students have reached by the time they join the academy in Year 7 are well below the national average. Students' limited literacy skills are a particular challenge: about a third of the current Year 7 cohort entered with reading ages two or more years below their chronological ages. In 2007, the first year of results for the academy, the percentage of students gaining at least five GCSE or equivalent A\* to C grade passes was in line with the national average. Significantly more girls than boys reached this threshold. The academy exceeded the national figure for the proportion of students gaining five or more good GCSE passes including two sciences, attesting to some strengths in its specialism. However, the percentage of students who gained five good GCSE passes including English and mathematics was low. Results of the Key Stage 3 national tests in 2007 were low in English, mathematics and science.

In 2007, by the end of Year 11 students' achievement was among the highest in the country. However, while their achievement in mathematics was satisfactory, it was inadequate in English. The outstanding overall achievement is founded on a range of qualifications other than GCSEs that are well suited to students' needs. The pattern of students' achievement is very uneven with much more progress being made in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3. In marked contrast to the very positive picture at Key Stage 4, students' achievement by the end of Key Stage 3 in 2007 was close to the lowest nationally and was inadequate. Girls do better than boys with regard both to standards and achievement at Key Stages 3 and 4.

The academy's robust analysis of standards and progress is founded on the effective tracking system introduced at the beginning of this academic year. Predictions for outcomes of this year's national tests and examinations indicate that the academy is, with the exception of English at Key Stage 3, on track to meet its challenging targets at Key Stages 3 and 4. The percentage of students expected to gain at least five good grades at GCSE level is more than twice this year's target. Students appreciate the support they have received, such as revision classes and coursework completion sessions, to help them prepare for external tests and examinations. A range of suitable strategies is in place to raise standards: these include a successful reading recovery programme for Year 7 students; early entries to GCSE examinations in several subjects; alternative off-site vocational opportunities at Key Stage 4; literacy booster classes; and mentoring for boys. However, while interventions play a useful part, raising the quality of learning to consistently good is the key to improving standards overall and particularly in literacy and numeracy.

### Sixth form

The academy's sixth form is growing: from a very small first cohort two years ago, numbers are rising gradually with about a third of the current Year 11 students

expected to take up places in September. Almost all Year 13 students plan to stay on for a further year to complete their courses. The curriculum meets students' needs, offering opportunities for GCSE resits, vocational courses and an increasing range of subjects at AS and A level. It is enhanced by trips and visits that contribute positively to students' personal development. Achievement is satisfactory with the majority of students on track to gain results at their predicted levels. Teaching and learning are satisfactory overall. Although currently arranged on an ad hoc basis, support and guidance are appropriate to students' needs because staff know individuals well. However, leaders recognise the need to develop formal systems that support students to attend well, develop good study habits and meet deadlines.

### Personal development and well-being

The behaviour of the majority of students is satisfactory and they have positive attitudes to learning. This represents a significant improvement during the past two years. There has been a considerable reduction in the number of exclusions since the academy opened. There is a calm working atmosphere in most classrooms and around the campus. The whole-school discipline system is clear, understood by staff and contributes efficiently to the smooth day-to-day operation of the academy. In lessons, most students work conscientiously and try to contribute with appropriate comments or questions. Some can collaborate effectively with other students to plan work or solve problems, and this independent learning makes a good contribution to their academic progress. Many students demonstrate enjoyment in their learning, especially when there is enthusiastic, lively teaching. Their determination to succeed is seen in the rising attendance for external examinations: this is now very close to 100%. However, there is still a minority of students who are disruptive in lessons and who find it difficult to settle to independent work. They make very little academic progress in lessons and provide a considerable challenge for teachers.

Attendance is improving, although it is still below average overall, and well below average in Key Stage 4. The improving trend can be seen in the rising attendance figures in younger age groups. The academy, in partnership with external agencies, has already introduced robust measures to improve the attendance of persistent absentees and these are making a positive difference. A new director for attendance is introducing an extended extra-curricular programme and an incentive scheme, which are beginning to improve the attendance of more occasional absentees. With these strategies, the school is confident of raising attendance to the national average level within a year. A minority of students have poor habits of punctuality. Senior leaders monitor this closely and are successfully bringing about improvements through challenge and guidance to the students and their families.

Students have a satisfactory understanding of the importance of exercise and diet within a healthy lifestyle. The physical education curriculum makes a strong contribution to this. However, many students demonstrate an unhealthy approach in their selection of the snacks and drinks they bring into the academy. Groups of students are gaining useful experience in making a positive contribution to life in the academy and the wider community. For example, the student council makes a strong contribution to decisions about school uniform, improving attendance and reducing

litter, while a Community Sports Link Team of students organises coaching and competitions for neighbouring primary schools. The developing vocational curriculum and work experience programme make a satisfactory contribution to students' economic well-being. However, this is tempered by low standards in literacy and numeracy.

### Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is improving as a result of the monitoring, evaluation and guidance provided by senior leaders. Academy records, confirmed by inspection evidence, show that two fifths of the teaching is good or better, which is considerably more than when the academy opened. The most effective teaching is characterised by enthusiasm, high expectations and interesting, challenging activities for students. Lessons have clear success criteria which are used as a basis for assessing students' progress and giving them feedback that helps them to improve their work. Students' progress is accelerated because they are involved in assessing their own work and that of their fellow students. Students are enthusiastic and independent learners who are keen to contribute their good ideas to the rest of the class.

These features are not consistently found in the majority of classes. Where lessons are less effective, the methods promoted by senior leaders are often being used, but not effectively enough to make a significant difference to students' learning. For example, lesson objectives are presented in terms of activities to be completed rather than progress in learning, and questioning does not engage all pupils or effectively assess their understanding. Many students are unclear about their targets or how they can improve their work. In too many lessons there is an over-reliance on worksheets that provide insufficient challenge to students when they are working independently. As a result, they are less motivated to work hard and more likely to engage in disruptive behaviour.

The curriculum is designed well to meet the needs of students. In Key Stage 3 there is additional provision for English and mathematics to boost the well below average levels of literacy and numeracy students join the academy with in Year 7. There is a strong emphasis on improving literacy skills in subjects other than English. These strategies accelerate students' progress in basic skills, without unduly narrowing the breadth of their overall curriculum. In Key Stage 4, the design of the vocational and academic curriculum increasingly combines high aspirations for the students with a clear understanding of what will motivate them to participate fully. The range of options is extended by providing students with opportunities to attend courses away from the academy.

Throughout the academy, the provision for underachieving students and those with a learning difficulty and/or disability is well planned. There is a good range of strategies to meet the social, emotional and learning needs of students, and the flexibility for students to move between them as their needs change. The curriculum is also adapted effectively to meet students' needs related to their personal

development and well-being. The physical education and sports curriculum, in particular, makes a strong contribution to students' health education and their motivation to attend school. This is enhanced by good student participation in an extensive range of extra-curricular sports activities.

Staff know students well and tailor support to their individual needs and circumstances. However, tutorial periods are not used effectively to promote good behaviour and positive attitudes to learning. At the beginning of the day informality does not set a business-like ethos in preparation for the day's work. At the end of the day, lack of purposeful activities leads to desultory sessions where time is not well used. Sessions are more purposeful at points in the year when tutors discuss students' progress towards their targets and their attitudes to learning. This information is shared with parents at frequent intervals and, together with parents' evenings and opportunities to meet with tutors, keeps them well informed about their children's progress.

The academy's science specialism is providing a fillip to the development of new curriculum options at all key stages. Learning is being enriched by a growing number of events, such as a 'carbon footprint' day, which combine effectively with enterprise-based activities to broaden students' experiences. However, while standards in science subjects are rising at Key Stage 4, they remain too low Key Stage 3. The impact of the specialism on improving learning across the academy is limited. Links with partner primary schools are fostered well, mainly through the work of a dedicated member of staff. The 'Women into Science' course is adding to opportunities for members of the community to return to formal education and develop their skills.

## Leadership and management

The principal has high aspirations for the academy and is providing a clear sense of direction towards realising these. He has largely gained the commitment of staff to the journey: much improved staff attendance indicates a considerable rise in staff morale. Staff value the principal's open-minded approach to innovations they propose. He is well supported by the able and enthusiastic vice-principals. Their expertise in the academy's priority areas of literacy and numeracy adds significant strength to the academy's senior leadership. As a senior team they have led the academy in some notable strides towards the stated mission, 'the best in everyone'. For instance, curriculum design, examination entries and support for students with learning difficulties and challenging behaviours exemplifies the academy's inclusive approach. Planning for priorities is well founded on accurate self-evaluation. Information gained from tracking students' progress and attitudes is used effectively to guide strategic decisions such as the deployment of staff and resources to meet students' learning needs. This is enhanced by thorough and perceptive monitoring of teaching and learning and departmental performance. Rightly, the principal has a robust approach to ensuring that staffing is appropriate to deliver the academy's priorities.

The management structure is designed to accommodate the projected growth of the academy. It supports the development of teams together with the system for holding

staff to account for the performance of students. However, further training is required for staff, particularly at middle leadership level where quality is variable, to develop the skills and understanding required for this to inform the academy's self-evaluation effectively. The academy has a systematic approach to linking professional development to priorities for improvement and performance management targets.

The leadership of the academy is strengthened by the expertise of an experienced chair of the governing board. He is well aware of ways in which the governing board can develop further its contribution to the opportunities the academy offers. Together with the principal, he is working with the local community's development groups to enhance the role of the academy as an agent for improvement in the locality. The capacity for improvement is satisfactory.

#### External support

The United Learning Trust has provided valued support and mentoring for the principal and senior leaders. In addition, a number of curriculum leaders have benefited from training and opportunities to share good practice in other partner academies. The academy's self-evaluation has been well supported by dialogue with the school improvement partner.

#### Main judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

#### Priorities for further improvement

- Improve learning so that it is good or better in most lessons.
- Raise rates of attendance and punctuality particularly at Key Stage 4.
- Put formal arrangements in place for the care, guidance and support of sixth form students.
- Ensure that effective use is made of tutorial periods to foster students' personal development and well-being.

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

Yours sincerely

Jane Austin  
HM Inspector of Schools