

25 June 2008

Mrs K Turner
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Turner

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Sheffield Park Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Susan Bowles HMI and Sonya Williamson HMI to your academy on 23 and 24 June 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 including 16 part lessons, one assembly and two tutor sessions; scrutinised documents and met with the executive director, the headteacher, senior and middle leaders, nominated staff, groups of students and the chair of governors. The inspection team did not inspect sixth form provision as this was inspected during the inspection of Sheffield Springs Academy.

Context

Sheffield Park Academy opened in September 2006 in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. Its new building opened in April 2008. The academy has close links with Sheffield Springs Academy. The two academies have the same sponsor, United Learning Trust, and provide a small collaborative sixth form, based on both sites, which was established in September 2007. An executive director is responsible for the overall performance and strategic direction of both academies. Sheffield Park is led by a recently appointed substantive head and leadership team. It also benefits

from a shared governing body and executive leadership team and business and data managers. The academies are developing further shared systems and procedures.

There are 1060 students aged 11 to 17 years on roll, of whom 74 are in the first year of 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. Half of the students are identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities although the proportion of students with a statement of educational need is below average. The proportion of students from minority ethnic communities is much higher than average and a high proportion of these students speak English as an additional language. The academy and the sixth form are oversubscribed.

Almost all staff from the predecessor school joined the academy. However, there have been a number of staffing changes. The substantive headteacher and deputy headteacher retired in July 2007 and the academy was run by an interim headteacher until November 2007 when the new headteacher took up her post. The two deputy headteachers and the head of the specialism joined the academy in September 2007. A number of staff will leave the academy at the end of the summer term. The academy has had difficulties in appointing suitably qualified and experienced staff especially in science and mathematics. The academy has a specialism in business and enterprise.

Achievement and standards

Students' attainment on entry to the academy is well below average particularly in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. Students' reading ages are exceptionally low; almost 60% of students in Year 7 entered the academy with reading ages at least a year and a half below their chronological age. Basic skills are weak and many students have difficulty expressing their opinions orally or in writing. Poor attendance and previous underachievement mean that many students have gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

Standards attained in the first national Key Stage 3 tests taken by students in 2007 were well below average in English, mathematics and science. Far fewer students reached higher levels in English, mathematics and science than did so nationally. However, standards in all core subjects were higher than in the last year of the predecessor school although the academy did not meet its targets in English and mathematics. Given their starting points, students' achievement was good, with good progress in English and mathematics and satisfactory progress in science.

In the first Key Stage 4 examinations, standards were well below average but attainment improved. The proportion of students attaining at least five A* to C grades rose from 29% in the last year of the predecessor school to 39%; the proportion of five A* to C grades which included English and mathematics also rose from 11% to 19%. However, far fewer students attained five or more A* to G grades than did so nationally and this figure was the same as that of the predecessor school. The academy met its target for five A* to C passes but did not reach the targets set in other areas. Given their starting points, especially their performance at

Key Stage 2, students made satisfactory progress overall with progress in mathematics slightly better than in English. However, there were variations between subjects. Students performed less well in art, science and design technology than in English, mathematics, religious education and drama. The specialism made a very positive contribution to improving attainment.

Although there were no significant discrepancies between student groups in terms of ethnicity, the lower attaining boys and students at school action plus made unsatisfactory progress and students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities did not progress as well as their peers in other schools. Academy data indicate that standards will rise at Key Stage 4 in 2008 and that academy targets will be met. However, data indicate that there will be a slight decline at Key Stage 3, partly because national tests took place immediately after the disruption caused by the move into the new building.

The new leadership team is tackling underachievement but senior leaders are aware that they have a great deal more to do. Systems to assess students and track the progress they make are not robust enough, and some teachers do not use the available data effectively enough to ensure that targets are challenging and that the needs of individual students are met. Prompt action has been taken to improve matters and there is some early evidence to show that this is making a positive impact in some lessons. A more robust system to track the progress made by students will be introduced in September 2008. This will help staff identify underachievement at an early stage.

Personal development and well-being

Most students speak positively about the academy and appreciate the new facilities. Students are reasonably well prepared for lessons and respond well to gentle reminders, for example to take off outdoor coats. Most students appreciate the support and care provided by staff which helps them feel safe and valued. The effectiveness of the care and support they receive is helping to raise their aspirations and has contributed well to higher staying-on rates and retention in the sixth form. Most students who leave the academy go on to further training or employment.

The new headteacher is determined that all students will be fully included in the life of the academy and that they will enjoy their education. Exclusions have declined significantly and there are new procedures to ensure that students remain in lessons. In the longer term this is a very positive step but in the short term there is more disruption in some lessons than was previously the case. Some staff lack the skills to manage inappropriate behaviour successfully and some students lack the maturity and social skills to work successfully in whole-class situations. A worrying number of students in Year 7 are unruly and unwilling to listen to their teachers or other students. However, this is not the case in all year groups or lessons, and behaviour at break and other social times is generally very positive. Lunchtime is a pleasant and sociable occasion, students are happy to eat and converse with staff and with other students and are polite and helpful to lunchtime staff.

Although the inclusion centre provides good support for some of the most vulnerable students, procedures to identify and tackle students' specific learning, emotional and social difficulties and/or disabilities are not sufficiently robust or wide ranging to ensure that all students receive effective and well targeted support. Systems to support students who are at an early stage of learning English or who speak English as an additional language are also at an early stage of development. This has a negative impact on the confidence and self-esteem of some individuals. Racial tensions, previously a concern, have been reduced; however, students from different ethnic backgrounds do not mix in free time or in lessons and it was rare to see students from different backgrounds working cooperatively. This is something the academy is well aware of. With the help of community leaders, the academy has begun to tackle the uneasy relationships between groups, and formally recorded incidents of bullying and racism are low. However, steps taken to promote better intercultural understanding, such as special events and assembly themes and work in lessons, have not yet made a significant impact. Some effective work helps students to work in new and unfamiliar situations, for example a drama/dance project with Sheffield theatres combining Key Stage 3 and 4 students working in partnership with local primary schools. This type of event has been specifically targeted to support the transition of Year 6 pupils as well as the development of leadership and communication skills. However, the academy does not have systems to assess the impact of this work.

All procedures to ensure that students are safe are implemented rigorously. New systems to review students' progress have encouraged more parents to attend meetings with staff and become involved in their children's education. Students express confidence in staff and willingly confide in tutors, year heads and associate staff if they have concerns. The support given to vulnerable students, including those with poor attendance or at risk of exclusion, is well designed but attendance overall is well below average. Effective work has been done to ensure that record keeping is accurate and to provide well targeted interventions and systematic tracking of poor attenders. Academy records indicate that there has been a small (less than 1%) improvement from 86.4% in 2007 to 87.1% in 2008.

Quality of provision

Teaching is broadly satisfactory. However, a significant proportion is inadequate and there is not enough good teaching to help students overcome previous underachievement. Lesson planning is improving and teachers share the objectives of the lesson with students. However, although the lesson-planning format requires teachers to identify the specific needs of individual students not all teachers take this into account when structuring the lesson or planning activities. Some students become frustrated or bored when work is too challenging or not challenging enough and their behaviour deteriorates. However, students who, a short time ago, would have been excluded from lessons now remain in the academy and benefit from full-time education. Although in the short term this is causing some additional stress and turbulence it is a significant improvement.

Teachers make effective use of the improved information and communication technology (ICT) available in the new building in order to make lessons more

interesting to students. However, textbooks and worksheets are not always sufficiently well matched to students' needs. Not all students take pride in their work and some work books are covered in graffiti and contain badly presented and careless work. Some students do not know their current levels of attainment, their targets or what they must do to improve. Many teachers mark students' work carefully providing good guidance which helps them to improve; however, this is not yet the case in all lessons. Sessions designed to improve basic skills of literacy and numeracy do not always have the desired impact because not all teachers have the subject knowledge necessary to deliver them successfully.

The leadership team has implemented a programme of lesson observations and other quality assurance procedures and teachers receive regular feedback about their work. This is aligned to a programme of staff development and coaching, designed to ensure that staff have the skills needed to adapt to new ways of working. This is having a positive impact in some departments. However, day-to-day monitoring is not always rigorous enough to ensure that new approaches are embedded and applied consistently in all subjects and lessons.

There are some small but encouraging signs which suggest that recent actions are leading to improvement. Some inadequate teaching is being eradicated and in many lessons teachers expect more of their students. In the best lessons students benefit from interesting, well informed teaching and well targeted activities which capture their interest. The pace of these lessons is brisk and sensitive classroom management ensures that all students are included and focused on their tasks. Teachers know their students well and give them effective support which helps them complete written work confidently and students are encouraged to answer questions and share their ideas. In these lessons behaviour is often exemplary and students make at least satisfactory and sometimes good progress.

Curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory overall. The National Strategy provides the basis for planning core subjects, and the curriculum is increasingly adapted to offer options which meet students' needs and interests. Increased curriculum time is given to improving students' basic skills and the academy offers a range of work-related learning, enterprise opportunities and vocational courses. Students entering Year 9 next September, including those with low prior attainment who have had limited choice in the past, have been able to choose from a wider range of options. Steps have been taken to ensure the quality of vocational provision and minimise obstacles to overall progress which have arisen for those learning off site. The academy's specialism in business and enterprise is beginning to make an impact. A lead member of staff and two coordinators have been appointed with a brief to embed the specialism across the curriculum. In future, students with low levels of achievement will be able to take a greater number of qualifications by the age of 16.

The academy has an inclusive approach illustrated by new post-16 courses which build on Key Stage 4 and start at an accessible level. As a result, post-16 progression rates have greatly increased and continue to rise. Those entering the sixth form this summer can choose from a full range of Level 1, 2 and 3 courses including an

increased range of A levels. Productive work with the partner academy is enabling a wider range of courses to accommodate the needs and aspirations of all students. The academy enjoys productive partnership links with colleges and universities helping it to raise aspirations and progression.

Leadership and management

The recently appointed headteacher is the third to lead the academy in the past 12 months. Successive changes of headteacher, although unavoidable, have resulted in slow progress in aspects of the academy's development. The new headteacher is providing effective and determined leadership. She has formed positive relationships with students and is a highly visible presence around the academy. The move to the new building was managed very successfully and most staff and students appear to be settled and comfortable in their new surroundings. The headteacher has identified the most important weaknesses and is taking appropriate and well considered action. Plans made to improve the academy are effective and are focused appropriately on the most important priorities; however, they do not always identify how the actions taken will be monitored. The academy does not yet have robust enough systems to evaluate the impact of its actions so it cannot provide clear evidence of improvement.

The specialism is well led and managed and is having a very positive impact on students' achievement and personal development. The headteacher, although very capable, is currently responsible for too much of the improvement process. Although she is very effectively building capacity in the leadership team, some senior and middle leaders lack the necessary skills and experience and still require a great deal of support and development. Some important systems and initiatives are implemented inconsistently or not at all because not all leaders and managers hold staff well enough to account. The governing body is still adapting to its new role and responsibilities. The chair of governors is very well informed about the most important matters facing the academy but most of his time thus far has been given to the partner academy. The executive director is also acting as headteacher of the partner academy. However, despite the fragility of some aspects of leadership there is some early but encouraging evidence to suggest that the rate of progress is improving and that the academy has the capacity to improve further.

The Sixth Form

The collaborative sixth form is well led and managed. Staff recently appointed to join the academy from September 2008 potentially add to the capacity for the development of the sixth form. A good start has been made to delivering post-16 provision across a range of programmes at different academic levels. Small teaching groups, good classroom relationships and a well resourced learning environment have contributed to good retention rates and satisfactory attendance. Of the small number of sixth form lessons observed, none were less than satisfactory. Teachers new to sixth form teaching are keen to develop their teaching styles and strategies to support independent learning.

Assessments and records for tracking individual students' progress show that all students are on course to meet their targets. Reports from external moderators confirm that internal assessment is secure. Students are very positive about their experience of sixth form study. They value greatly the individual support made possible by the small teaching groups and are appreciative of the excellent facilities available to them. Many opportunities are afforded to students to enrich their learning experience, for example visits to universities and participation in the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. These, together with a number of opportunities to take on responsibility in the academy, contribute significantly to students' personal development, an outcome of provision which they themselves recognise.

The academy is aware that the very ambitious plans for expansion in September 2008 need to be carefully managed to ensure that emerging strengths are not diminished.

External support

The academy has developed a number of useful links and partnerships with a range of organisations and businesses in the local community, the city of Sheffield and with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. The school improvement partner has provided effective support and challenge.

Main Judgements

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

Priorities for further improvement

- Eradicate unsatisfactory teaching.
- Establish systems to evaluate the impact of actions taken in order to demonstrate that improvements are being made.
- Take immediate action to improve behaviour where it is still unsatisfactory.
- Improve attendance.
- Improve the progress made by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.
- Build a more cohesive community in the academy.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
HM Inspector of Schools