

19 September 2008

Mr R. Dore  
Principal  
Unity City Academy  
Ormesby Road  
Middlesbrough  
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Dear Mr Dore

Ofsted monitoring of Grade 3 schools and academies

Thank you for the help which you and your staff gave when I inspected your academy on 18 September 2008, for the time you gave to our phone discussions and for the information which you provided before and during my visit. I also appreciated the opportunity to meet with the representative from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and a group of students. Please extend my thanks for the hospitality to all those involved.

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.

As a result of the inspection in May 2007, the academy was asked to:

- Raise attainment;
- Improve attendance;
- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding teaching so that students engage more actively with their learning;
- Use assessment to target work precisely to the needs of individuals or groups of students;
- Develop students' independence and encourage them to take responsibility for their own actions.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy is making good progress in addressing the issues for improvement and in raising the students' achievement.

Since the inspection in May 2007, the academy's accommodation has been remodelled further to better meet students' requirements. The Enterprise Centre, funded by the DCSF and opened in September 2008, offers vocational courses in

partnership with external providers for students at the academy and neighbouring schools in Middlesbrough. The number of students on roll is falling and the proportion who join the academy with special educational needs is rising year-on-year. The academy has gained a number of awards including Sportsmark and Heartsmark, achieved in December 2007. Staffing has recently stabilised after a period of high turnover.

A diverse curriculum enables more students to make good progress and achieve well in a range of subjects and vocational courses by the time they leave the academy. Standards attained by students at Key Stage 4 have risen since the last inspection but remain well below average overall. Unvalidated results for 2008 indicate that the proportion of students attaining 5 or more A\* - C grade passes at GCSE exceeded challenging targets. However, performance in core subjects remains variable. Although there has been a significant rise in standards in science and further improvement in mathematics, the number of students attaining five good passes including English and mathematics remains low. This reflects, in part, the legacy of past underachievement.

At Key Stage 3 significant gaps in students' literacy skills contribute to standards that remain well below national expectations overall. However, unvalidated results from tests taken in 2008 indicate that Year 9 students identified as gifted and talented exceeded their targets in English, mathematics and science. A whole-academy priority to raise reading standards over the last year has improved students' ability to read and understand different texts in subjects across the curriculum. Students whose reading levels were particularly low have benefited from targeted support so that their standards are rising more rapidly. As strategies to improve the quality of reading across the curriculum become embedded, a new focus on developing students' skills in oracy and extended writing is being established.

Assessment information is analysed by senior and middle leaders to quality assure its reliability and to identify where progress is accelerating or where weaknesses remain. Actions are targeted appropriately to raise attainment. To ensure students are on track to achieve their potential, the outcomes of steps taken to raise the achievement and standards of different groups are scrutinised regularly.

A positive learning environment has been established that has done much to promote students' personal development, instilling a greater sense of self-belief and raising aspirations. Students are encouraged to take greater responsibility within the academy, for example, through the academy council or by acting as peer mentors. While attendance remains well below the national average, it is improving year-on-year due to the implementation of a raft of strategies, including developing links with students' families, by a committed staff team. Students generally behave well and have responded very positively to the academy's insistence since the start of the year on correct uniform. They value the consistency with which the overwhelming majority of teachers follow agreed procedures for managing behaviour and know that good behaviour benefits everyone in their learning. Higher expectations of students, means that fixed-term exclusions remain high and staff acknowledge that

a small minority of students continue to display challenging behaviour. Individualised support has proved effective in re-engaging some of the most challenging students in learning.

The curriculum has been refined further to increase its relevance to students and to meet a wide range of needs and aspirations. There are many more opportunities for curriculum enrichment through educational trips and events. The Enterprise Centre has extended opportunities for students to gain accreditation in vocational courses. The 'Inner College' caters well for students with complex and special educational needs offering a more personalised curriculum designed to remove barriers to learning, build confidence and accelerate progress in acquiring basic skills.

A strong focus has been placed on improving the quality of learning through effective teaching. Evaluation of teaching and learning is used to help teachers identify aspects of their work that could be developed further. Professional dialogue between teachers about strategies that promote students' learning has been established through the introduction of Professional Learning Partners. The 'Aspiring Advanced Skills Teacher' programme is also beginning to have a positive impact on increasing the proportion of good teaching and eradicating the small amount that is inadequate. Observations during the visit confirmed the academy's views about the quality of teaching and learning. Best practice includes a good variety of interesting and manageable tasks well matched to students' needs; imaginative use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning; well-focused explanations and briskly paced lessons that engaged students' interest. Where teaching is less effective, lessons are over-directed by the teacher and opportunities are missed to check exactly what students have learnt. Students are generally clear about their targets and know what they must do to improve. They appreciate the strategies used by teachers to engage them more actively in their learning.

Highly effective leadership and management by the principal and director of education have underpinned the improvements at the academy since the last inspection. A strong determination has been established amongst staff to improve students' life chances by equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to support them well in their future education or employment. The principal has raised the expectations and aspirations of staff and students by communicating a clear strategic direction that is supported well by an improvement plan with clearly identified priorities. Senior and middle leaders are guided and held rigorously to account by precise milestones in the plan that enable progress to be measured and evaluated to inform future planning. The roles of year leaders and progress managers have been further clarified since the start of this term and the impact can already be seen in improved attendance and a more focused approach to the use of assessment information by tutors to check students' progress.

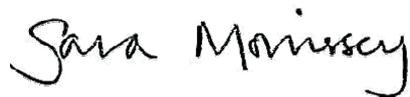
The academy's specialist subjects are making an increasing contribution to students' achievement. For example, teachers focus routinely in their lesson planning on developing students' enterprise skills and the increased availability of computers for students supports their learning well. Closer links are being established with primary

partners and other education providers in Middlesbrough to support students' learning. Staff value the support they have received from the local authority and other partners working with the academy, which has contributed positively to tackling areas of improvement.

The principal and the director of education have acted decisively to tackle remaining barriers to improvement and to manage the changes in the academy that have resulted from falling student numbers. They are well informed by accurate self-evaluation and are clear about the challenges that remain to raise standards further. Firm foundations have been established on which to base future improvement.

I hope that you have found the visit helpful in promoting improvement in your academy.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sara Morrissey".

Sara Morrissey  
Her Majesty's Inspector