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Ms Esther Holland
Associate Headteacher
St Marks Church of England Academy
Acacia Road
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Dear Ms Holland

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to St Marks Church of England Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Jacqueline Krafft, HMI to your academy on 23 and 24 September 2008, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a return 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 associate headteacher, the executive principal, the chair of governors, representatives of the sponsors, and groups of students.

Context

St Marks is a Church of England academy and currently specialises in science, technology and enterprise. It was designated for an accelerated opening in September 2006. Due to the postponement in confirming the opening date, caused by a Judicial Review, there were delays in finalising staff appointments and in carrying out improvements to buildings. The academy is currently fully staffed, but about two fifths of teaching staff are on temporary contracts, which is significantly

higher than at the time of the previous monitoring visit. Staff turnover continues to be high: about a quarter of the teaching staff have left over the past year. Pupil mobility is also high.

There are 867 students on roll, including 106 in the sixth form. About one third of students are from White British backgrounds, a quarter are of Black heritage, and a fifth are from Asian backgrounds; about a tenth are at the early stages of learning English. Approximately a third of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, which is well above the national average; and the number with statements is slightly above the national average. The academy serves a community that experiences significant socio-economic deprivation; almost a third of students are eligible to claim free school meals, nearly three times the national average. Students join the academy with lower than average knowledge, skills and understanding, but attainment on entry is still broadly average.

The senior leadership team (SLT) has changed significantly since the last monitoring visit. The founding principal has left and the academy is now led by an executive principal and an associate headteacher, both temporary appointments. They had been in post for about three months at the time of this visit. An additional associate deputy principal was seconded to the academy in January 2008. One of the sponsors has withdrawn from the academy and the sponsor representatives on the governing body have changed.

Achievement and standards

The previous monitoring visit judged that standards were exceptionally low, and achievement was inadequate at both Key Stage 3 and 4. This judgement has since been confirmed by the release of validated data. GCSE results in 2008 show a small increase in the overall figures but the academy did not reach its targets. The academy correctly judges that standards remain exceptionally low and students continue to underachieve significantly at Key Stage 3 and 4. Achievement in the first year of the sixth form was also inadequate.

Results in 2008 improved in English at Key Stage 3 and targets were reached. In science GCSE results improved significantly as compared to the very low 2007 results. This is a result of the robust and effective actions taken by the head of department. This degree of improvement is not consistent across the academy. For example, achievement is poor at Key Stage 3 and 4 in mathematics.

Personal development and well-being

The previous visit judged students' behaviour and attitudes to learning to be generally satisfactory and sometimes good. This continues to be case in the classroom. However, younger students report that they do not always feel safe in communal areas and believe that staff could do more to challenge poor behaviour. Students are articulate, confident and feel a sense of commitment to improving the academy and its reputation in the local community. They have a very clear

understanding of what has improved and what more needs to be done. They have confidence in the new headteacher, one saying 'she's made a change; she's toughening up the school'. They report that she has higher expectations of what they can achieve which has increased their self-esteem. They now want more active involvement in the development of the academy. Attendance is satisfactory, although it is variable across year groups and exclusions have reduced since the last monitoring visit. Too many students arrive late to lessons.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning remains inadequate. About a quarter of teaching observed was inadequate, which matches the academy's own judgement. Although there are now fewer inadequate lessons there is not enough good or better teaching across the academy to raise standards and ensure that students make the progress they should. Achievement has improved in GCSE science as a result of the good teaching of members of the SLT, particularly the associate deputy principal. In addition, external support provided by the advance skills teacher has raised expectations and energised the department. This, combined with the effective use of assessment information and well targeted intervention, has raised standards and student enjoyment in science. This degree of improvement is not evident elsewhere in the academy.

The weaknesses in teaching identified by the last monitoring visit remain. Students are often compliant in the classroom rather than genuinely engaged in their learning because expectations and challenge are too low. Insufficient use is made of assessment data to meet different needs and students report often feeling bored. In too many lessons the pace is slow which limits the progress that students make.

Students report that they know the levels they are working at and have targets for improvement. They say that marking is regular and helpful but is inconsistent across subjects. They specifically identify mathematics as an area in which they would like more help. They would also like clearer guidance on the effective completion of coursework in a number of GCSE subjects. Although information is gathered about the progress that students make the academy does not use it to plan effectively for further improvement. Senior and middle leaders do not analyse the information well enough to quickly identify potential underachievement.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2007:

- The quality of teaching and learning – inadequate
- The monitoring of students' academic progress – inadequate

Leadership and management

The main reason why progress since the last monitoring visit has been inadequate is the failure of the governing body to respond quickly and effectively to the key issues for improvement. There is no strategic plan against which to measure progress and

enable governors to support and challenge the SLT. The governors are still too reliant on the information provided by the SLT, as they have not established effective mechanisms to accurately judge the quality of the academy's work.

The newly appointed executive principal has an acute understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. He is clear about his strategic role and has taken decisive action in the very short time he has been in post. He works very effectively with the associate headteacher who has raised expectations and has the confidence of staff and students. The associate principal and the associate deputy principal, who was appointed in January, are able to judge correctly the quality of teaching. As a result, the academy now has an accurate picture of the quality of teaching and learning. This information is being used to reduce inadequate teaching. The associate deputy principal has also instituted an improved programme of induction and support for new teachers. He is an excellent role model for both staff and students. The three new members of the SLT are already forming a powerful, effective team.

However, the new leadership has had too little time to impact on student achievement. Although there are some emerging strengths, middle leadership remains inconsistent and has too little impact on standards, achievement or the quality of teaching. Middle leaders are not held sufficiently accountable for the progress that students make, neither are they given the responsibility or resources to drive improvement. Therefore, the academy has not demonstrated the capacity to improve.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2007:

- Planning for improvement so that it focuses on the key priorities to support rapid progress in raising standards – inadequate
- The rigour of the senior leadership team's evaluation of teaching and learning – satisfactory

External support

Decisive, recent action by sponsors has strengthened both the SLT and the governing body. The advanced skills teacher in science has had a demonstrable influence on standards in science. The quality of external support has yet to have the same impact on standards across the academy.

Main Judgements

This visit has raised serious concerns about the standard of education provided by the academy and I am recommending a return visit.

Priorities for further improvement

- The governing body's capacity to robustly support and challenge the academy in acting on the issues identified by the first monitoring visit

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Lynes

Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF