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Mr P Mulholland
Principal
William Hulme's Grammar School
Spring Bridge Road
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Dear Mr Mulholland

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to William Hulme's Grammar School

Introduction

Following my visit with Sara Morrissey HMI to your academy on 2 and 3 October 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, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, senior and middle leaders, nominated staff, groups of pupils and the chair of governors. Inspectors observed 13 lessons and two assemblies.

Context

William Hulme's Grammar School opened as an academy in September 2007 in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. New buildings have recently been constructed and these have been fully operational since September 2008. Completion of all facilities is expected by December 2008. The academy's specialisms are modern foreign languages and science.

There are presently 801 pupils on roll, aged from 3 to 18 years, including 200 in the junior school and 157 in the sixth form. The majority of the academy's pupils, approximately 60%, are boys. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals is below the national average, as is the proportion of pupils identified as having

learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The number of pupils from minority ethnic communities is higher than average, with 38 different groups represented. A total of 24 languages are spoken.

The principal took up his post in July 2008, following the retirement of the previous principal. A new head of the junior school also started at the academy in September 2008. Almost all teachers and support staff transferred from the predecessor school and the academy is heavily oversubscribed. The academy's sponsor is the United Learning Trust.

Achievement and standards

The academy has high expectations of its students and staff work hard to ensure that they achieve well.

In the Early Years Foundation Stage, children are generally working above expected levels by the end of the Reception year with some having started with below average skills and capabilities in language development. Teachers' assessment of pupils' attainment at the end of Year 2 also indicates that a high proportion of pupils are working at levels that are above the national expectation in reading, writing and mathematics. In Year 6, pupils' attainment in reading and writing is closer to the national average, with attainment in mathematics at an above average level.

For Years 9 and 11, unvalidated national test and examination results in 2008 indicate that, when measured against all performance indicators, attainment levels in both year groups are high. A good proportion of students in Year 9 attained the higher levels in English, mathematics and science and in Year 11 over 90% of students secured five A* to C GCSE grades, including English and mathematics.

Pupils receive very good levels of support and guidance to help accelerate their progress. Details of the attainment of different groups of pupils in different subjects are recorded independently by subject leaders and used to identify where there is potential underachievement. This, together with an analysis of examination results with senior leaders, helps to identify variations in achievement and to target areas for improvement. However, a common format for setting targets, tracking pupils' progress and providing an overview of pupils' achievement over time has not yet been established.

This, in part, is due to difficulties the academy experienced in securing a baseline of assessment information. Despite its best efforts, problems in gathering information about pupils' prior attainment and also transferring existing assessment information from the independent predecessor school to a new database prevailed throughout the previous academic year.

However, the academy is now on the point of introducing a new electronic system to formalise the recording of assessment information collected at regular intervals throughout the year. Staff welcome this development which will enable them to

analyse more precisely the progress of different groups of learners and set appropriate targets.

Teachers, new to working with national curriculum levels, have benefited from training to improve the reliability of the assessment data collected. While inconsistencies remain in some subject areas, senior leaders are now more confident in the accuracy of this information, particularly in English, mathematics and science.

Personal development and well-being

Academy staff work well together and they have established an ethos that combines high expectations of pupils with a strong network of support and care. Pupils are proud of the academy and their positive attitudes to academy life promote their learning well. They appreciate their teachers' efforts to increase their active participation in learning especially through the use of information and communication technology.

Pupils enjoy coming to the academy and this is reflected in their punctuality and attendance, which are both good. The house system provides a strong sense of belonging and pupils enjoy the range of competitions and awards that they can obtain from participating in house activities.

In some year groups a small number of pupils, who do not yet have well established work habits, are benefiting from the consistent application of behaviour management strategies in lessons. Behaviour, however, across the academy is very good.

Pupils feel confident that their views are listened to. They report that there are many opportunities to contribute to the wider community through membership of the council and participation in an extensive range of activities and events. Older students act responsibly as prefects and support younger pupils with their learning. Academy leaders are keen to extend opportunities for pupils to express their views and help to shape the future development of the academy.

Quality of provision

More than half of the lessons observed were good or better, with no inadequate practice seen. Most classrooms have effective displays to promote and support learning with assessment criteria on view in some classrooms.

New technology is having a positive impact on teaching with interactive whiteboards used to very good effect to engage pupils' interest and encourage participation. In one sixth form lesson, students were also able to use voting handsets to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.

Pupils said that they enjoyed their lessons and this is reflected in their very positive attitudes to learning. Relationships between pupils and academy staff are excellent.

Inspectors observed good examples of both paired and group work, where discussion secured understanding and ensured progress.

Characteristics of the best lessons included clear explanations of learning objectives, followed by well-planned activities, which were closely linked to pupils' learning needs. The use of targeted questioning, which raised expectations and challenged pupils to explain their ideas, was also evident.

Generally, teachers mark pupils work regularly, with some examples of good guidance which helps pupils to improve. However, this is not yet consistent in all subject areas across the academy.

Although the lack of information about pupils' prior attainment has not supported detailed lesson planning, teachers have continued to work hard to enable all pupils to achieve as well as they can. The academy's ethos of continual improvement has ensured well-targeted and effective developments in teaching and learning. The 'aiming for excellence' group has strengthened classroom practice, through the promotion of assessment for learning and the use of data to inform planning.

There is, at present, no formal programme of lesson observations within the academy, although in a number of subject departments informal visits to lessons take place. The introduction of performance management procedures remains a high priority.

The academy is continuing to develop a curriculum model to more closely reflect the changing and diverse needs, interests and aspirations of all its pupils. There is a clear emphasis on developing a suitable balance between academic, vocational and work-related learning opportunities.

At present, the Early Years Foundation Stage and primary curriculum engages pupils and promotes their enjoyment of learning. Pupils benefit from having access to secondary specialist teachers in a range of subjects and are able to study a modern foreign language from the start of their academy life.

The breadth and balance of the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4 are satisfactory with statutory requirements being met. Recent curriculum developments include the introduction of a 'learning to learn' course and Spanish for Year 7 students.

Courses available to students in Years 10 and 11 are enhanced through the use of the academy's specialist status. These presently cater well for students and help support achievement. For example, all students are able to continue their studies in a modern foreign language and also have an opportunity to gain a further GCSE in astronomy. The academy, however, intends to develop further vocational opportunities at Key Stage 4, to ensure all are able to achieve well.

In the sixth form, the academy presently offers a broad range of traditional level 3 courses, namely at AS and A level. The academy's inclusive approach to learning and

personal development is reflected in its decision to extend provision in 2009 and to include a wider range of subjects, with some vocational courses.

Pupils consider the academy's enrichment provision to be a strength which 'brings out the best in everyone'. There is active involvement in community work and supporting local projects and charities. The academy is also recognised as an International School by the British Council. The local and wider community is able to make full use of the academy's facilities.

An extensive and varied range of opportunities are offered to pupils, including sport, music, arts and science extra-curricular activities, with visits and trips at home and abroad. The Combined Cadet Force and the academy's residential facility in Yorkshire are notable features, which successfully support pupils' achievement and their personal and social development.

The academy takes many steps to ensure that pupils are well cared for in a safe and welcoming environment. Procedures for safeguarding pupils are in place and pupils are well supported by committed teams of staff who communicate very effectively with each other.

Good links have been established with external agencies and the local authority who have provided personalised support for pupils with specific educational needs. Pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities settle into academy life with ease because staff establish effective links with families and gain a good understanding of pupils' academic and personal needs. Staff recognise the scope for developing transition procedures further to fully embrace the philosophy of a 3 to 18 school.

Pastoral leaders are beginning to develop their roles further in monitoring the academic progress that pupils make and are aware of the potential challenges that may be faced with increasing numbers attending the academy. They work well with teams of form tutors and provide good pastoral care, particularly for senior pupils within the academy.

Leadership and management

Since taking up post, the principal has provided skilful and effective leadership. His clear educational direction embraces the academy's present strengths, whilst fully recognising the need to further improve key aspects of the academy's work.

In this, the principal is strengthening the role and effectiveness of all leaders, enabling them to become more fully involved in evaluating the work of the academy. Committed senior leaders are now fully responsible for improvement priorities giving them a good shared overview of how the academy is developing. They are also linked directly to subject departments, ensuring that both senior and middle leaders have a collective accountability for pupils' results. A member of the senior team now also has overall responsibility for literacy and numeracy across the academy.

The academy's improvement plan outlines key priorities including developing differentiated teaching, closer monitoring of pupil performance, promoting a culture of self-evaluation and introducing performance management for all personnel within the organisation.

Academy leaders are aware that, at present, the monitoring of teaching and learning needs to be more robust and that the use and analysis of performance data is not yet sharp enough to guide teachers in their planning and in setting appropriate targets to challenge all learners.

In this, subject leaders, particularly, are continuing to develop their role. Their growing involvement in the self-evaluation process, through reflective discussions on pupil performance outcomes with the senior leadership team, is a positive start.

Despite extensive building work and on-going information and communication technology difficulties, the academy has continued to work hard to successfully introduce more detailed assessment in Key Stage 3, which is effectively raising the profile of assessment in Years 7, 8 and 9. Extensive professional development has also secured improvements in aspects of teaching and learning and the academy has continued to promote and support its inclusive ethos.

The chair of governors is very well informed about the academy's progress and shares the leadership's vision for the academy. Governors provide a good level of both support and challenge.

After a disruptive initial year, the academy is now poised to accelerate progress. New buildings and infrastructure continue to be successfully managed, key priorities have been suitably identified and targeted strategies are in place. Staff are enthusiastic, with a genuine readiness to embrace further change in order to strengthen the academy's capacity to both meet the challenges ahead and maintain the highest educational standards.

External support

The academy has developed good links and arrangements with an extensive range of partners and organisations. These include local academies, independent schools and businesses and initial education providers.

Rigorous evaluation reports provided by the school improvement partner are helping the academy to keep its progress under review, with clear recommendations for further action. Good relationships exist with the local authority, which has provided effective assistance, with learning support provision and computer software training. The academy has also benefited, as part of the United Learning Trust group, from advice on personnel matters, information and communication technology, finance and professional development.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that assessment information is reliable, consistently applied and is effectively used to maximise achievement.
- Use assessment information effectively to ensure all lessons are well matched to learners' needs and are suitably challenging.
- Increase the contribution of middle leaders in monitoring and evaluating the work of the academy, to ensure that they have a greater impact on achievement and standards.

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

Yours sincerely
Angela M Headon
Her Majesty's Inspector