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Mr Brian Dixon
Principal
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Dear Mr Dixon

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Oasis Academy, Immingham

Introduction

Following my visit with Sonya Williamson HMI to your academy on 15 and 16 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.

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Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, the deputy and assistant principals and other senior staff, the directors of learning in English, mathematics and science, a group of staff who are in the early years of their teaching careers, groups of students and sixth-form students, the chair of the academy council, and a representative of the DCSF. Informal discussions were held with staff and students during the course of the visit.

Context

The academy opened in September 2007, a year earlier than initially planned, housed in the buildings of the predecessor school. It is due to move into new buildings in January 2009. In September 2008, after consultation with students and parents, it opened a sixth form, a gap of only two years since sixth-form students were admitted to the predecessor school. The academy is one of two in the locality

that are sponsored by Oasis, a charitable trust of Christian character. The academy's specialisms are engineering and business and enterprise.

The academy has experienced significant difficulties in staffing, particularly initially due to unexpected last-minute resignations, including of several senior staff. Nevertheless, the academy opened fully staffed, with three quarters of the teachers and all of the support staff transferring from the predecessor school. Since then, there have been further changes in staffing. Currently, 14 of the 61 teachers are in the first two years of their teaching careers. A further nine are unqualified instructors, many of whom teach vocational courses, including motor vehicle engineering, construction, and hair and beauty.

There are 791 students on roll aged 11 to 19 years, 110 of whom are in the first year of the sixth form. The numbers of boys and girls are roughly equal, except in the sixth form where there are twice as many girls as boys. Fewer students than is typical enter the academy at times other than in Year 7. Almost all the students are of white British heritage. Very few have home languages other than English. Around a third of the students and a quarter of the sixth-form students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and, of these, 20 have statements of special educational need. These proportions are high. The local community experiences some social and economic disadvantage and little tradition of further and higher education. 17% of the students have free school meals and 35% of the sixth-form students are eligible for the educational maintenance allowance.

Achievement and standards

A barrier to the academy's work on assessment and evaluation of standards and achievement has been the lack of reliable information about the students' prior attainment. No assessment records were made available to the academy at the time of transition. Progress in dealing with this issue has only begun to gather momentum recently. The limited data on the prior attainment of students who transferred into Key Stage 4 from the predecessor school show a clear legacy of underachievement that stemmed from earlier inadequacies in provision.

Students currently in Years 7 and 8 entered the academy having attained slightly above average test results from primary school whereas those who transferred directly to the academy from the predecessor school had below average attainment at Key Stage 2. Many of these students, but also some younger students, have weak basic skills, most marked in literacy, and these are barriers to successful learning. In too many lessons, insufficient attention is given to meeting students' individual needs and helping them to make the most of learning opportunities.

Early indications from the provisional results of the 2008 national Key Stage 3 tests are that the academy has some way to go to ensure that students are achieving satisfactorily. Approximately 60% reached the standard expected of 14 year olds, Level 5, in English and mathematics. The science results appear weaker but are

subject to remarking. Given their starting points, fewer students than might be expected reached the higher levels.

There is a mixed picture at Key Stage 4. The academy's self evaluation cited the notable statistic of 98% of the students gaining five or more A*-G grades at GCSE and equivalent qualifications. Subsequently, this was corrected to 92%, with 86% including English and mathematics, figures which are significantly more modest. Nonetheless, no student left the academy without a recognised qualification. While the proportion of students gaining five or more A*-C grades rose to 43%, only 17% included English and mathematics, which means that the academy becomes part of the National Challenge and eligible for additional support. The predecessor school's 2007 results were 36% and 31% respectively. The fall in performance is largely attributable to poor mathematics results. Underlying issues relating to subject leadership have been resolved and the current picture is brighter.

The academy sets ambitious targets for individual students' performance and is developing well-organised procedures for monitoring students' progress. Their effectiveness as a management tool for raising achievement and targeting support and intervention will be dependent on the accuracy of teachers' assessments. There remains work to be done to ensure all staff assess students' work accurately, drawing on existing good practice.

The use of assessment information is underdeveloped and not helped by the fragmentation of managerial responsibility for different elements of assessment. Its use by teachers to inform curricular and lesson planning and by managers to probe the quality of provision is generally weak. Assessment criteria were rarely on view in classrooms or used effectively to support learning. A language of standards does not pervade the academy's work.

Personal development and well-being

Good progress has been made towards developing students' personal skills through consistent concerted efforts, clearly directed by leaders and managers and applied well by staff. The ethos of the academy is welcoming, positive and conducive to learning. Attendance has improved and is now in line with national figures. The trend of improvement applies across all year groups although it is less positive in Year 11. Procedures for following up absence have been strengthened. A helpful agreement has been reached with partner primary schools that all will give a consistent message to help reduce absence due to term-time holidays. Attendance has also improved as a result of students' greater enjoyment of school as the curriculum more closely matches their interests. Insistence that students remain on site and the development of a wider range of activities for them at lunchtimes have helped to improve attendance and motivation in afternoon and after-school sessions.

Behaviour is satisfactory overall, although students report it can get out of hand when students are unsupervised. Nevertheless, students say they feel safe in the

academy and that incidents of bullying are rare and dealt with well. They feel strongly that staff are very approachable. Students increasingly enjoy their education, particularly when teachers use interesting activities and approaches and provide opportunities for them to self-assess, make choices and so become increasingly independent learners. However, such practice is not embedded across all teaching.

Students' skills in information and communication technology (ICT) are improving slowly in response to more flexible course provision but ICT is too frequently used as a resource for teaching rather than learning. Work relating to the academy's specialisms is well designed to increase students' awareness of the world of work and to promote greater enthusiasm and aspiration for their studies and future employment.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning was at least satisfactory in almost all of the lessons and good in around a third. This profile is less strong than the academy's judgements on teaching. There is a need to place teaching and learning at the heart of the academy's improvement and raising attainment plans. In many lessons, there was evidence that the teachers have the potential to improve, given appropriate guidance, training and support and, in some cases, simply more time to gain experience. In discussion with inspectors, many teachers showed an encouraging readiness to reflect on their teaching and explore ways to improve their practice.

Common strengths in the teaching included good relationships between teachers and students which often aided unobtrusive management of behaviour. Students generally listened attentively while teachers gave clear explanations and, given the opportunity, worked sensibly in pairs or groups. Many lessons drew on an interesting range of resources. The main shortcoming of the satisfactory lessons was a lack of attention to meeting the students' varied needs. Usually, all students attempted the same work so that the most able were not sufficiently challenged and the less able struggled to make progress with the tasks. The role of teaching assistants and the contribution they should make to students' learning was not well thought through.

Characteristics of the good lessons included effective sequencing of activities and the constant monitoring of how well students were learning, drawing on strategies such as mini-whiteboards to check understanding, coupled with skilful questioning. Misconceptions were anticipated and individual responses and errors turned into teaching points. Teachers provided well-judged questions or prompts, punctuated with time for thought. Opportunity for reflection was a feature of some 'Opening Minds' lessons.

An area for development in much of the teaching was how to tailor planning to meet the range of students' needs and abilities. Rarely were tasks or resources adapted to support students' identified needs. While lesson plans identified what all, most and

some students should learn, these expectations were not matched to specific activities. More attention to the explicit contribution to be made to developing students' literacy and numeracy skills is also required.

Support for inexperienced teachers is well thought through and appreciated by those staff. While good use is made of a range of development opportunities, the enhancement of all teachers' professional skills is not rigorous or systematic enough to meet their current needs and raise the quality of teaching across the academy.

The curriculum is increasingly broad and varied. Positive attempts to meet students' needs have been successful because of the high levels of consultation with students and their parents/carers. Timetabling problems, now addressed, meant that students did not get a good start to the 2008 academic year and were unsettled by changes to rooms and course clashes. The 'Opening Minds' curriculum in Years 7 and 8 makes a good contribution to students' personal and study skills. However, data analysis shows that lower attaining students and those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities have made insufficient progress. Targeted interventions are now being made and the curriculum has been adapted by assigning more time to English and mathematics and increasing staffing. The impact of these actions is, as yet, unknown.

In Years 9 to 11, the curriculum includes a good range of vocational, academic and work-related courses, most of which are offered at different levels to meet students' needs and interests. Early indications are that students' increased enjoyment of these courses is helping to improve their achievement overall at Key Stage 4. Partnership links, for example with the business community, further enhance the curriculum. Students enjoy a good selection of extra-curricular activities.

Students are cared for well and receive good pastoral support. Increasing numbers of support staff, learning mentors, counsellors and other professionals work effectively with groups of students and individuals and help reduce barriers to learning. Students are, however, less well supported with their academic progress although this is beginning to improve. They now have targets in all their subjects and are increasingly aware of them although not necessarily how the targets might be achieved. Marking is inconsistent. Too little makes specific comments that help students understand what to do to improve their work.

The sixth form

The sixth form is in the early stages of development but initial indications are positive. Leadership and management of the sixth form are developing well. Visionary thinking, strong efforts to maximise the benefits of partnership working and consultation with students and their parents/carers have helped to ensure that students are happy with the start they have made to their sixth-form education. They received thorough personal advice to help them make choices from a wide range of courses. Tutors encourage students to work alongside younger students in

teaching, counselling and support roles; this contributes to their personal development. The new assessment and tracking systems are also being applied in the sixth form. Students know their targets; the small class sizes enable individual attention which results in students knowing how well they are doing and what they need to do next. Staff are being trained well; they are adapting their teaching and learning styles appropriately. Procedures for monitoring and evaluating the range of new provision are being put in place as part of line-management arrangements.

Leadership and management

The principal has been successful in leading the academy through the challenges of its first year. He has worked tirelessly on its behalf, being prepared to challenge weak performance and praise the effective. Many students and staff attributed the improvements in ethos to his leadership, his visible presence around the academy throughout the day. The current year presents further challenges, not least the smooth transition to the new buildings next term, and realising the potential offered by the recently strengthened leadership at senior and middle levels. While many of these staff have yet to grow fully into their roles, there is considerable scope to enhance the effectiveness of their work. The pragmatic approach adopted so far needs to give way to a more strategic view. At present, senior staff are responsible for specific management activities, some overlapping without any one person having a secure overview. Not all fully appreciate the interrelationships, for instance between whole-academy data systems, analysis of performance data, quality of teaching and learning, impact of curricular developments, and continuing professional development. The urgent need to raise attainment is not well served by this piecemeal management activity. The improved climate for learning and the readiness of staff at all levels to develop their practice means the academy is well placed to review leadership roles, revise action plans, and couple these with a professional development programme that underpins their effective implementation. The current array of improvement plans contain positive actions but most do not place enough emphasis on the core business of teaching and learning or consider what training might be required to ensure that the impact is maximised. Success criteria are not sufficiently well defined. There is no robust plan for assessment, the sixth form or provision for students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The line-management structure is appropriate. Middle managers understand their role in monitoring and supporting the work of their colleagues although it is not always evident how rigorously areas for improvement identified through monitoring are followed through to address weaknesses. There are examples of middle managers sharing good practice, for instance on systems for moderating teachers' assessments and analysis of students' performance.

The academy's self-evaluation contains a lot of information about its work but the text is not sufficiently evaluative. This is recognised by the academy, which includes as key areas for improvement monitoring and evaluation and the analysis and interpretation of data.

Arrangements for governance are complex. The responsibilities of the academy council centre on ethos and the community whereas the Oasis executive carries out the functions of a governing board. Both receive from the principal the same set of reports, which he describes as anecdotal accounts at this stage, rather than documents that give a robust account of actions taken, linked to relevant improvement plans, and rigorous evaluation of their impact. While the principal recognises the need to develop better quality reporting, it nevertheless remains unclear how the arrangements for governance will serve the dual roles of acting as the academy's critical friend while holding it to account for its performance.

External support

The academy makes good use of links with external partners, including local businesses, to provide curricular and work-place opportunities for vulnerable and disaffected students. The principal works in collaboration with the local authority, chairing the Local Area Partnership group. The principal cites the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust as the main source of professional support for the academy with a lesser role to date for the Oasis Trust.

Overall, the academy is in need of a greater level of external support. The sponsor should explore how it might support the development of senior leaders, individually and collectively, to give greater strategic drive to the academy's work. The unsatisfactory position regarding the leadership of provision for students who have learning difficulties and disabilities needs to be swiftly and effectively resolved.

The school improvement partner's reports for the 2007/08 year rightly highlight positive features of the academy's progress. The few areas of concern were expressed in a low-key way and progress on them was not routinely reported in the next note of visit; for instance the need for the principal to delegate responsibility. A greater level of constructive challenge, followed through on subsequent visits, would prove beneficial to the academy at this stage of its development.

Main Judgements

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

Priorities for further improvement

- Accelerate students' progress in lessons and over time by increasing the proportion of teaching that is good or better.
- Bring coherence to the work on developing assessment.
- Review leadership responsibilities and revise improvement plans to reflect a sharper awareness of the key priorities that underpin the raising of attainment, coupled with the necessary professional development to ensure maximum impact.

- Secure effective leadership and management of provision for students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chairs of the academy council and the Oasis executive, and the Academies Group at the DCSF.

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones

Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dcf.gsi.gov.uk]