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Ms Jane Bowman
Principal
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Dear Ms Bowman

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Oasis Academy, Wintringham

Introduction

Following my visit with Sara Morrissey HMI to your academy on 26-27 November 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, each member of the academy leadership team, the directors of learning for English, mathematics and science, a group of students, the chair of the academy council, and a representative of the DCSF. Year 11 students were sitting 'mock' examinations in the week of the inspection.

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. The academy is one of two in the locality that are sponsored by Oasis, a charitable trust of Christian character. The academy has two

specialisms: sport and health and, more recently, business and enterprise. In September 2009, the academy plans to open a sixth form.

There are 748 students on roll aged 11 to 16 years. This year, the academy was fully subscribed in Year 7. The numbers of boys and girls are roughly equal overall but with an imbalance in some year groups. More students than average have entered the academy at times other than at the start of Year 7: this was most marked in Year 9 last year. Around a half of the students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and, of these, 39 have statements of special educational need. These proportions are high. The academy has a specialist resource base designated for up to 25 autistic students. Almost all of the students in the academy are of white British heritage; consequently very few have home languages other than English. The local community experiences considerable social and economic disadvantage and has little tradition of further and higher education. Nearly 40% of the students are eligible for free school meals.

Almost all of the students and staff, including the principal, transferred from the predecessor school to the academy. As the academy has grown and the breadth of its curriculum has widened, the number of staff has increased. It has had some difficulty in finding suitably qualified and experienced staff in a few subjects.

Achievement and standards

While the academy admits students of all abilities, those who joined in Year 7 in 2007 and 2008 attained below average results overall in Key Stage 2 tests in primary school. The profile of their attainment is similar to the other cohorts in the academy. Data on the prior attainment of students who transferred from the predecessor school into Year 11 show they underachieved in Key Stage 3. Many students have weak basic skills, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and these impede students' progress across the curriculum. The academy has raised the profile of the importance of these crucial skills but still has some way to go to ensuring all students are equipped with the skills required for successful learning.

The provisional results of the 2008 national Key Stage 3 tests show that 56% of the students reached Level 5, the standard expected of 14 year olds, in English and mathematics, and 50% in science. These figures fall well short of the academy's challenging targets and reflect to some degree the large number of new students who joined Year 9 part way through 2007/08. A minority of students reached the higher levels. The academy recognises that not enough students are making the progress that they might. Its data show that students currently in Year 9 have a legacy of underachievement to overcome if they are to reach the standards that might be expected of them given their starting points. The academy recognises that more consistently good teaching is required if students are to catch up from earlier weak progress.

The picture at Key Stage 4 is more mixed, with some important positive aspects but also some areas of concern. The introduction of vocational qualifications has enabled

many more students to attain five or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent qualifications: the figure of 55% is a rise of over 20 percentage points when compared with the predecessor school's final set of GCSE results. However, of these students, only 22% included English and mathematics. This is below the National Challenge target of 30% and means that the academy becomes eligible for additional support in the drive to raise standards. The academy's assessment is that the current Year 11 is on track to reach higher standards at GCSE in 2009.

The vast majority of students, 92%, attained at least one recognised qualification. Although the proportion of students gaining five or more A*-G grades also rose to 75%, it remains below the national average. There is a need for the academy to concentrate on ensuring that all students are helped to achieve their potential, whatever their starting points. Data show that students whose learning difficulties are identified at 'school action plus' generally achieve less well than their peers. A more forensic examination of the underlying factors that aid or impede these students' progress day-to-day and over time is required.

The academy is developing suitable procedures for setting targets for individual students' performance and monitoring their progress. At present, though, more than one system is in operation and the differences within them are likely to hamper the effectiveness of tracking and intervention strategies. The academy has a wealth of data which is analysed in various ways. However, the link between the data analysis and the quality of teaching and learning in each classroom and within subject areas is not being made sufficiently well to identify weaknesses or inconsistencies in practice. This is a necessary next step in developing the strategic use of data.

Assessment criteria were displayed in some classrooms and as lists of 'I can...' statements in students' books. Many teachers made helpful reference to grades or National Curriculum levels in lessons or when marking students' work. However the use of assessment information in planning lessons to meet students' diverse needs is less well developed. In too many lessons, all the students did the same work and consequently not all made the progress that they might.

Personal development and well-being

Staff have worked hard to create a positive ethos for learning throughout the academy. This is reflected in the warm and respectful relationships that have been established between students and adults. Strategies to build students' self-esteem and confidence as learners are proving effective, particularly among groups of younger students, so that more students feel confident to 'have a go'. In Years 7 and 8, the 'opening minds' programme is resulting in good attention being given to the development of students' study skills so that they are able to take a more active part in their learning in groups and independently. This, combined with a comprehensive programme of enrichment activities, promotes students' enjoyment of the academy. Students generally respond well to staff's high expectations: they behave well in lessons and around the academy. The small minority who do not follow agreed behaviour procedures are supported well by staff, who work in

partnership with a range of external agencies. Consequently, exclusions have fallen to low levels.

The four 'communities' within the academy are effectively managed by a team of staff who students value as a source of help and support. Students report that incidents of bullying have declined and that any problems are dealt with well by staff. Community coordinators have established a broad range of strategies to promote regular attendance and to emphasise the importance of keeping safe. Attendance rates are rising but remain below average overall due to a small group of students who are persistently absent. Regular meetings of staff who work with vulnerable students and those who are experiencing difficulties or who are mid-year admissions to the academy, enable support to be well targeted, with effective use made of external agencies as required. Good efforts are made to build links with families to enhance this support further.

Students have many opportunities to take responsibility in the academy and are proud to represent it. 'Vertical' tutor groups, which contain students of all ages, have proved popular and enable students in different years to get to know each other. Older students act responsibly to support younger ones. Students feel confident that their views are heard. They value the opportunities given to experience new activities through the academy's specialisms (sport and health, business and enterprise). These have expanded students' aspirations and motivation as learners.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning varied in the eighteen lessons observed during the monitoring visit. While almost all was satisfactory or good, the profile overall was not as strong as the academy's more positive evaluation. This stems, in part, from the academy's focus on teaching strategies rather than their impact on students' learning.

All lessons were planned using a common format and learning objectives were generally shared and reviewed at the end of the lesson. Although plans outlined the activities that students would undertake, there was less focus on precisely what students would learn. Furthermore, inconsistencies in the use of assessment information meant that teachers did not always tailor plans sufficiently to meet students' individual needs. Many teachers used interactive whiteboards but missed opportunities for students to interact with them and exploit their potential as a tool for learning.

In the best lessons, teachers' enthusiasm motivated students to learn. The teachers drew on their good subject knowledge to plan stimulating activities that captured and sustained students' interest. Students made good progress when working collaboratively and they enjoyed taking responsibility for specific tasks that related to whole-class learning objectives. Teachers' effective questioning challenged students to think through responses and to extend their answers. In a few lessons, good attention to developing literacy skills enhanced students' learning further.

In the less effective lessons, planning did not provide enough opportunity for students to participate actively: teachers took a dominant role for too much of the lesson. Consequently, students became passive and the pace of their learning slowed. Teachers did not provide modified tasks to enable all students to make rapid progress from their starting points, or did not check and build their understanding carefully. A few lessons started late or too slowly, reducing valuable learning time.

The academy has established a supportive environment for learning. Although many students lack confidence in their abilities, good working relationships mean that most are willing to ask for help or say when they do not understand the work set. Students listen well to each other and their teachers and, in the better lessons, they benefit from opportunities to express their views orally.

Effective steps have been taken to adapt the curriculum to meet the diverse range of needs of individual and groups of students and to build progression for students from ages 11 to 19. A programme for younger students that develops their skills as learners has proved effective in building confidence and self-esteem. Careful attention has also been paid to developing a comprehensive range of pathways for students embarking on courses leading to GCSE and equivalent qualifications, other forms of accreditation, and work-related learning. Senior leaders have worked hard to tailor provision to meet better the needs of all students including those who are vulnerable or at risk of exclusion. Good success rates in some of these newer Key Stage 4 courses mean that the number of students progressing to further education, training or employment has increased.

Enrichment activities enhance the curriculum and make a good contribution to improving further the working relationships between adults and students in the academy. The sport and health specialism has been embraced by staff and is incorporated into the teaching of subjects across the academy. Good practice has been shared and has been recognised by the Youth Sports Trust. Enterprise activities are beginning to extend students' understanding of the world of work and to develop their skills across the curriculum.

Leadership and management

The principal provides clear direction to the work and development of the academy. She is well supported by a team of deputy and assistant principals whose whole-academy responsibilities are well matched to their individual strengths. Management systems and procedures are clearly defined and carefully implemented: they underpin the academy's capacity for further improvement. Morale is positive. Staff at all levels are clear about their roles and responsibilities. They are generally reflective and want to improve their practice. Equally, they know that underperformance will be tackled.

The role of middle-level leaders is being developed appropriately to place more emphasis on their responsibility for the quality of provision and standards attained in their areas. Their effectiveness varies: some are better placed than others to lead

the necessary improvement. Middle-level leaders monitor their areas of responsibility but systems for following up their findings are not robust enough. Line management by senior staff is well received and generally effective. Progress against development plans is checked regularly, records kept, and actions followed through.

The academy's self-evaluation is largely accurate in assessing where progress has been made and in identifying what remains to be done. Less weight is sometimes given to issues that underlie areas where outcomes are not as strong, for instance the proportion attaining at least five A*-G grades. Not all students achieve equally well: eradicating these inconsistencies has rightly been identified as a key priority for the academy. The development plan encompasses the breath of the academy's work and is supplemented with plans for individual areas. The plans would benefit from greater use of quantitative success criteria and milestones to enable the gauging of progress. However, of greater importance is the need to link evaluation of outcomes to day-to-day classroom practice to ensure a more strategic approach to improving the quality of provision, 'quality first teaching', rather than relying heavily on intervention to tackle low performance and underachievement.

The new chair of the academy council has a good understanding of governors' evolving role in the academy's development and the contribution governors can make by acting as critical friends. The minutes of meetings of the academy council are of good quality and reflect the level of challenge provided, coupled with support for the academy. Links with areas of the academy's work are in the early stages.

External support

The principal makes effective use of external support. Links with the local authority, for instance, capitalise on National Strategy support for English, mathematics and science and on developing the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. The academy considers this support to be of good quality while recognising that it has had variable impact. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has provided a range of bespoke support for the academy, for instance valuable training for middle-level leaders and help with the 'transition project' through which some Year 6 students joined the academy early during the summer term. The support provided through different strands of the Oasis Trust has been of uneven quality so far but with signs of improvement as the Trust grows into this dimension of sponsorship.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise achievement in English, mathematics and science for all students.
- Improve the quality of teaching and learning, adopting a systematic approach that ensures weaknesses are identified and tackled and good practice is shared.

- Review and refine the use of assessment data so that it is accurate, underpins day-to-day practice in the classroom, and its analysis informs strategic leadership of the curriculum, teaching and learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors 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]