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Mrs Monica Cross
Principal
St Matthew Academy
St Joseph's Vale
Blackheath
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Dear Mrs Cross

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to St Matthew Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Maria Dawes HMI and Sue Frater HMI to your academy on 20 and 21 January 2009, 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.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, groups of pupils and staff, and a representative of the governing body.

Context

St Matthew Academy opened in September 2007 following the closure of a primary school and a boys' secondary school. Its specialisms are in business and enterprise. The academy's new buildings were not completed to schedule and prolonged delays meant that pupils did not move in for six months. This period was challenging, as leaders were attempting to draw from the two predecessor schools to form an all-age academy in old and separate buildings.

Years 9-11 contain only boys; these year groups are small and pupils' standards on entry to the academy were well below average. Other year groups contain both boys and girls. The popularity of the academy is increasing and a significant number of pupils join at the start of Year 7. Pupils' standards at the start of the secondary phase are now broadly average. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is above the national average and the proportion with learning difficulties and disabilities is high. Pupils come from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

Achievement and standards

Many pupils enter the nursery with skills that are below those normally expected for their age. They are making satisfactory progress in the Foundation Stage, although their standards remain below average. The academy has recognised the need to improve the tracking of children's achievement through the nursery and reception classes to improve its accuracy; sensible and well-planned actions are being taken to achieve this. Pupils are also making satisfactory progress as they move through the primary phase. Analysis of the unvalidated results for the national Key Stage 1 assessments in 2008 indicates that these pupils' results were close to the national average. Using the performance of pupils in the predecessor school as a baseline, this indicates a rise in standards, particularly at the higher levels. Pupils are also making broadly satisfactory progress in the secondary phase. Overall GCSE results were well below national averages in 2008, partly because most of these pupils took fewer than eight GCSE qualifications. However, pupils' achievement in the qualifications that they did take was satisfactory.

Based on pupils' current work in lessons and on the academy's own records, there are signs that their achievement is increasing. Pupils speak of how their progress has improved since transferring to the academy. Measures to improve pupils' literacy levels, most notably the new literacy and accelerated reading schemes that have been introduced into the primary phase, are having a clear impact on their skills.

Personal development and well-being

Pupils in all year groups are positive about the new academy, and the facilities and opportunities that it provides. However, those in the secondary phase in particular say that this enjoyment is marred by the inconsistent quality of lessons. Much has been done to develop a strong sense of community across the whole academy. Older pupils enjoy a range of opportunities to support and act as role models for younger children, for example by listening to them read and supporting them in lessons. They rise to this challenge well and pupils in the primary phase appreciate and value their support.

Behaviour around the academy is generally orderly and calm. There are clear and precise systems for managing behaviour in primary classrooms; primary teachers apply these systems consistently and rigorously. As a result, the pupils are very clear about what behaviour is expected and the consequences of misbehaviour. However, secondary specialists who teach a few primary lessons do not always follow these systems closely enough and this can lead to some misbehaviour in their lessons. Systems for managing behaviour in the classroom at Key Stages 3 and 4 are not consistently applied by teachers. Secondary pupils say that too many lessons are still affected by low-level disruption and misbehaviour.

The attendance of secondary aged pupils has improved, although it remains below average in both primary and secondary phases. There is variability between the attendance rates of different year groups. Although staff work well with individual pupils to reduce absence, data about attendance are not used systematically enough to identify patterns, trends or improvements.

Quality of provision

There is considerable variability in the quality of lessons. A number of good and outstanding lessons were observed during the inspection. In these lessons teachers matched the work carefully to pupils' needs and interests, using a range of interesting tasks and teaching strategies to engage and challenge them. Pupils in these lessons responded enthusiastically to the challenge and behaviour was good. However, too many lessons lack sufficient variety to interest and challenge pupils: in these lessons teachers spend a lot of time talking to the whole class and pupils spend too much time listening. Expectations of pupils and the pace of learning are frequently too low, and most teachers are only just beginning to use information about pupils' targets and current attainment when they plan their lessons. Advice and guidance is inconsistent. In the primary phase pupils are clear about their curricular targets, marking is precise and helpful, and the pupils know what to do to improve. This is not always the case in the secondary phase.

The curriculum has been reviewed at all key stages and a number of useful changes have been made. Older pupils now have greater choice about optional subjects, although vocational opportunities are still somewhat limited. Many lessons are now 100 minutes long. This has enabled some teachers to be more innovative in their teaching and to develop more extended and interesting activities. However, where teaching is weaker, the extended lesson length exacerbates poor behaviour and a slow pace of learning.

Tutor time is now forty minutes long in the middle of the day at Key Stages 3 and 4. In some cases this time is used in a focused manner to develop pupils' learning skills and their social and moral understanding, and to give them helpful guidance about how to improve their learning. However, the use of this time is inconsistent and, in many cases, its impact on raising attainment is limited.

Leadership and management

The academy has a clear direction. Senior leaders have a strong vision for the potential benefits that being an all-through academy brings and much is being done to develop and exploit these opportunities. The academy now has a proven capacity to improve: senior leaders have a realistic understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses, and significant improvements have already been made. Extensive and ambitious plans are in place to support further development, although the key issues for improvement are sometimes lost in the wide range of planned actions. Much is being done to make improvements, although the impact of the academy's

actions on pupils' achievement, personal development and well-being is often not evaluated with sufficient precision. Challenging targets are being used to raise pupils' aspirations and teachers' expectations. However, the systems that the academy uses to collect and use data about pupils' achievement are still developing. Data are not always accurate enough, sometimes too complex, and are not used systematically enough to help raise standards.

Some useful work has been done to develop the quality of teaching and learning. Senior leaders have a good understanding of individual teachers' strengths and weaknesses. A wide range of training and development opportunities are helping many teachers to plan more interesting and varied lessons. However, leaders do not spend sufficient time observing lessons and feeding back to teachers in a way that helps them to improve their teaching. Additionally, while much useful work is being done to strengthen the general effectiveness of middle leaders, not enough is being done to ensure that they have the skills necessary to challenge and support teachers to improve their lessons.

The academy's specialisms in business and enterprise are already making a clear, positive contribution to its development. The termly enterprise weeks, for example, involve all pupils from Nursery to Year 11. These weeks are helping pupils to develop a wide range of skills and a deeper understanding of citizenship and community cohesion.

Inspectors drew the academy's attention to its failure to meet all the current Government requirements relating to safeguarding. Action to tackle this weakness is an urgent priority.

External support

The academy makes good use of external support from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and a wide range of other sources. This support is well directed and managed by senior leaders to ensure that it makes a positive and sustained impact.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Sharpen procedures for lesson observation to ensure that individual teachers have the feedback necessary to enable them to improve the quality of their lessons.
- Improve the way in which data about pupils' achievement, personal development and wellbeing are used to raise standards.
- Evaluate the impact of the academy's actions more precisely.

- Ensure that the academy complies fully with current Government requirements for safeguarding.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the Diocese of Southwark and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

Yours sincerely

Christopher Russell
HM Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF