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Ms Alison Appleyard
Principal
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Dear Mrs Appleyard

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Eastbourne Church of England Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Brian Blake HMI and Derek Neil HMI to your academy on 20-21 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 including 16 part lessons and two assemblies, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, senior and middle leaders, nominated staff, governors, a local councillor, groups of students, the chaplain and representatives of the sponsors.

Context

The academy opened in September 2007 in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. Its opening was accelerated. A new building is planned for completion in September 2009. The sponsors are the Church of England and David and Anne Crossland.

All students from the predecessor school transferred into the academy. There are 554 students between the ages of 11 and 16 on roll. Most students are of white British heritage and there are very small proportions of students from other ethnic

groups. Very few students are at an early stage of learning English but there is a small group of Polish and Eastern European students who receive additional support. The area served by the academy is one of significant social and economic disadvantage. An above average proportion of students is eligible for free school meals and this figure is rising. The proportion of students identified as having learning difficulties and / or disabilities is above average but only a very small proportion of students have a statement of their special educational need. An above average proportion of students join and leave the academy at other than the usual times.

The principal was appointed nine weeks before the academy opened. All staff from the predecessor school joined the academy. There have been a small number of staffing changes. Two new senior leaders, a director of finance, a literacy co-ordinator and a director of the specialism were appointed in 2008. The specialism is business and enterprise. The academy has found it difficult to appoint a well qualified teacher of English and has had similar problems recruiting a teacher of mathematics.

Achievement and standards

Students' attainment on entry to the academy is below average particularly in English. Data on the attainment of students who transferred from the predecessor school show that they underachieved in Key Stages 3 and 4. Many students have weak basic skills particularly in literacy. A significant proportion of students have a reading age which is below and sometimes well below their chronological age. There are weaknesses in students' written work, particularly in grammar and punctuation, and some students have a long history of poor attendance, exclusion or challenging behaviour which disrupted their education and led to gaps in their knowledge, understanding and skills.

The most recent unvalidated data from the academy's first Key Stage 4 examinations show that although overall standards remained exceptionally low, the proportion of students gaining 5 or more passes at A*-C improved slightly and there was a seven percent increase, to 28%, in the number of students gaining five or more A*-C grades, this is almost twice the 2005/6 figure in the predecessor school. However, this figure is below the National Challenge target and means that the academy is eligible for additional support to help in the drive to raise standards. The academy did not meet its targets at 5 A*-G although the figure was 10% higher than in the last year of the predecessor school. The proportion of students attaining 1 A*-G declined slightly.

Outcomes of tests at Key Stage 3 were disappointing. The proportion of students attaining Level 5 in all core subjects was lower than in the last year of the predecessor school and the academy did not meet its targets. Attainment at Level 6 showed a similar decline. Standards in English were particularly low and the

academy sent all papers back for re-marking. However, this made little difference to overall outcomes.

There continues to be a variation in the performance of boys and girls. Girls perform better than boys at Key Stage 4 but recent results show that boys are beginning to make better progress. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make satisfactory progress, although as with the overall school population, their performance remains much lower than equivalent national groups.

Further initiatives to raise standards have been introduced this year, including early entry for GCSE English. Recent results are encouraging, showing an improvement in overall standards. However, this initiative is so recent that the school has yet to evaluate fully the benefits of this for the students, especially those who have been entered for foundation level examinations who may want to achieve a higher grade than this examination permits. The academy is making satisfactory use of available performance data to identify targets for future improvement. Although these targets have been sufficiently challenging in the majority of areas, recent outcomes indicate that a more critical overview will be needed in order to ensure that these remain aspirational and achievable. The progress of students in lessons is satisfactory, although it is too variable across the school.

Personal development and well-being

The academy has had a very positive impact on the personal development and well-being of students. Students are friendly and polite and most conform willingly to the dress code. Evidence provided by the academy together with exclusion data indicates that behaviour in the predecessor school and in the first weeks of the academy was unacceptable. The academy has tackled this issue robustly. Any student failing to comply with academy expectations is given a gentle reminder and referred to the code of conduct. In most cases students respond very positively to this. Staff are consistent in their management of behaviour and deal with any issues firmly but sensitively. Although there is a large staff presence around the academy this is supportive and relationships between staff and students are good. Students are polite and helpful and are showing increasing signs of personal responsibility and care for others. They say that they feel safe in the academy. Older students report that the academy is much improved and that it is calmer and more positive than in the past.

The number of pupils excluded from the academy declined significantly in its first year, although figures remain high, however, evidence from the most recent term indicate that the figure is set to improve further. The principal and senior staff are determined that all students will remain within the academy and continue with their education. The introduction of an inclusion room and consistent approaches to handling the most challenging behaviour are having a very positive impact. Data provided by the academy suggest that attendance has improved and the number of

persistent non-attenders has declined, although attendance is not improving in the current Year 9 cohort. The academy has introduced a wide range of strategies to reduce student absence. These include working closely with the families of poor attenders, helping students understand the impact of poor attendance on achievement and rewarding good attendance.

The academy has helped students develop healthy lifestyles and stay safe by ensuring that younger students remain in the academy at lunchtime and have a school or packed lunch. Students receive very effective moral guidance and they are encouraged to reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs. They have developed a strong sense of loyalty to the academy and are looking forward positively to the next phase in its development.

Quality of provision

During the visit most teaching was satisfactory or better and more than a third of teaching was good. A very small proportion of lessons were inadequate. This is broadly in line with the academy's own evaluation. Students know what they are expected to learn and lessons proceed at a brisk pace which encourages students to make the most effective use of their time. However, in a small number of lessons the pace of teaching is too rapid and the time allowed for the completion of a task is too short for some students. Teachers are responding well to the guidance provided by the leadership team and to the professional development and coaching provided by external consultants. In many lessons students are given interesting activities and work in pairs or small groups sharing their ideas with others. This is very effective, it is promoting their oral and thinking skills and helping them to enjoy learning. In most lessons students respond well to questioning and participate fully in the lesson. Their attitudes are good and they appear to want to do well. However, given their past underachievement some do not have the skills and knowledge necessary to tackle new learning. As yet the academy does not have a system through which students could assess their learning and indicate to teachers that they require extra support. In a small number of lessons students are given the opportunity to assess their learning, their comments are honest and perceptive.

All teachers use a lesson planning format. Although this helps them to structure lessons and rehearse teaching, the present format is focused on what the teacher will do and does not identify outcomes for learners effectively enough. Although the plans identify students who need additional support or challenge there is little evidence to suggest that tasks are adapted well enough to meet their needs. As a result most students make satisfactory rather than good progress. Evidence from lesson observations and the work scrutiny indicates that where work is not well matched to students' needs their behaviour deteriorates and they complete little or no work. Students generally respond well when teachers' expectations are high. In some subjects and lessons students' books are immaculate; students produce a great deal of work and take care with content and presentation. However, not all books are of the same high standard. Marking is too variable. There are

inconsistencies within and between departments and some work does not appear to be assessed fully although ticks are placed at regular intervals. Students are not provided with enough helpful guidance to help them overcome the gaps in their learning and overcome weaknesses in basic skills. There are very few academy-wide teaching and learning structures or procedures and although there is some good practice in individual classes or departments this good practice is not adopted consistently across the academy.

Structures to monitor and evaluate teaching are secure, however, senior leaders have not always ensured that changes and new initiatives are consolidated and consistently applied. Recent investments in information and communication technology (ICT) are helping to motivate staff and students and improve learning.

The curriculum has a number of strengths. The 'enquiry' curriculum in Year 7, planned with guidance from partner primary schools, provides students with effective opportunities to acquire knowledge and develop learning skills and builds well on their experiences in primary school. Courses in Year 9 related to the academy's specialism have provided students with useful additional qualifications and have boosted examination results. The Key Stage 4 curriculum is designed to ensure all students achieve some success at GCSE by providing work and courses that match their abilities and interests.

The academy has plans to develop the curriculum further by making it more interesting and relevant to students. However, the curriculum is subject to frequent changes, many introduced before the impact of earlier initiatives has been evaluated or consolidated. For example, the academy decided to extend the 'enquiry' curriculum into Year 8 before its impact on the attitudes and standards of Year 7 had been fully evaluated. Senior leaders believe that early entry to GCSE will motivate students and improve achievement but do not appear to have considered potentially negative outcomes especially for weaker students.

The academy provides a very good range of extra-curricular activities, including breakfast club, sports, study support and opportunities to socialise before, during and after the working day. The academy does not monitor the students' participation in these activities. Students in Key Stage 4 are less likely to be involved than their younger peers.

The academy cares for and supports students well. All students are fully included in the life of the academy and are recognised and valued by staff. Students say that there is always someone who would help them and it is evident that they are very well supported. The chaplain provides good spiritual and moral guidance but also acts as a mentor, guide and friend reminding students of their appointments and responsibilities and accompanying them on trips and visits. She is supported effectively in this work by year heads, the counsellor and other school staff. Procedures for monitoring students' performance are developing but are not yet fully complete across all subjects and all areas of the school's work. This means that the

academy is unable to identify common trends in students' performance. However, there are some effective examples of collation and analysis of students' performance in the core subjects, which are helping senior managers and core subject leaders to gain a better understanding of the progress made by individuals. The support provided for students with identified learning needs is satisfactory and improving as staff become more familiar with new structures. The academy takes its responsibility to safeguard all students very seriously, and all reasonable efforts are made to ensure that the health, safety and general well-being of the students in and out of school. Child protection procedures are clear, and the academy fulfils its statutory requirements for safeguarding all students.

Leadership and management

The principal, supported by senior and middle leaders, has developed an inclusive ethos which is helping students enjoy their education and expect more from their future lives. Staff appreciate the support they receive and the opportunities for further development. Effective relationships have been formed with local schools, churches and the community

The leadership team have tackled long standing weaknesses and have brought about a number of significant improvements since September 2007. However, difficulties connected with the speed at which the academy opened have also had to be overcome. The principal did not have access to the school building until the academy opened and much of the planning for the new academy was undertaken by consultants. While there is nothing to suggest that this planning was not appropriate, there were some delays in the early months of the academy because proposed structures did not always meet the academy's most pressing needs or the vision of the new leadership team. As a result some time was lost in the early months as new plans and structures were developed.

Many senior leaders are new to senior leadership roles and while competent are still developing new skills and ways of working. The unavoidable absence of some team members and the time needed to plan the move to the new building has left the team a little overstretched and, as a result, the pace of improvement has not been as swift as intended. Plans made to improve the academy correctly identify the most important priorities but they do not identify how the actions taken will be monitored or evaluated. As a result the academy does not have robust enough systems to evaluate the impact of its actions so it does not always have a secure view of its own effectiveness. Governors are experienced and well informed. A well thought out committee structure ensures that governors can challenge as well as support the leadership team. Despite its early challenges the academy is well placed to enter 'Phase 2' of its development and has satisfactory capacity to improve further.

External support

The academy is supported by a firm of external consultants brokered by the diocese and by inspectors from Durham local authority. The academy feels that the support

provided for teachers and subject leaders has been effective. Reports written by the school improvement partner provide useful analysis and help the academy to focus on the most important areas for improvement. The academy has been supported well by the diocese.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.'

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards and improve the progress made by students
- Develop an evidence based rationale for curriculum innovation.
- Ensure that the targets set for students build accurately on their previous achievement
- Establish systems to evaluate the impact of actions taken in order to demonstrate that improvements are being made.
- Improve monitoring arrangement in order to ensure that new systems and structure are implemented consistently throughout the academy
- Improve attendance.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Graham
Her Majesty's Inspector

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