

CfBT Inspection Services
Suite 22
West Lancs Investment Centre
Maple View
Skelmersdale
WN8 9TG

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 01695 566 947
Direct F 01695 729 320
sdaly@cfbt.com



23 March 2009

Mr Tim McCarthy
Principal
Stockport Academy
Heathbank Road
Cheadle Heath
Stockport
Cheshire
SK3 0UP

Dear Mr McCarthy

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Stockport Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Marguerite McCloy HMI, Michael McIlroy HMI and Marianne Young HMI to your academy on 17 and 18 March 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, senior and middle leaders, a group of teachers in the early stages of their careers, groups of students and sixth-form students, the chair of governors, and a representative of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Inspectors spoke with the school improvement partner and others involved in providing external support for the academy.

Context

The academy opened in September 2007, housed in the buildings of the predecessor school. Almost all of the staff and students transferred from that school to the academy, including the headteacher and deputy headteacher, now principal and vice-principal. Further appointments were made during the first year, several at assistant principal and head of faculty level, thus completing the academy's leadership structure.

The academy opened a sixth form in September 2008. Like other maintained schools in Stockport, the predecessor school did not have a sixth form. In November 2008, the academy moved into new buildings adjacent to the predecessor school's buildings which have recently been demolished.

There are 637 students on roll including 60 in the first year of the sixth form. About 10% of students are of minority ethnic heritage; three students are in the early stages of learning to speak English as an additional language. An above average proportion of the students, 22%, have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and, of these students, 23 have statements of special educational need. The academy serves a community of diverse social and economic characteristics within which there are areas of significant disadvantage. Around 30% of students have free school meals, which is about double the national average, and nearly 60% of sixth-form students receive the education maintenance allowance.

The academy's ethos is Christian: its sponsors are the United Learning Trust (ULT). Its curricular specialism is science and, in common with other ULT academies, it also has a second specialism of business and enterprise.

Achievement and standards

A small cohort of students joined the academy in Year 7 in 2007. Like those students who transferred from the predecessor school, they had achieved below average standards in national Key Stage 2 tests and many had weak literacy skills. This year, the intake is 175 and the profile of the students' prior attainment is above average, making them the most able cohort in the academy.

The academy's first set of Key Stage 3 results (currently provisional) from national tests in mathematics and science were below its challenging targets for students' performance at Level 5, the standard expected of students aged 14 years. The proportions attaining the higher Level 6 showed improvement in comparison with the predecessor school's results. Most students made satisfactory progress from their starting points. No results are available in English.

The predecessor school's final set of GCSE results in 2007 were weak and untypical of its usual performance. The academy has been quick to regain this lost ground. At GCSE and equivalent qualifications in 2008, 33% of students gained five or more A* to C grades. These included English and mathematics for 28% of the cohort which was below the academy's demanding target and missed the government's floor target of 30%. This places the academy in receipt of support through the government's National Challenge programme. The proportion of students attaining at least five A* to G grades rose by over 10% and 93% gained at least one qualification. Despite these encouraging signs, students' achievement overall was not good enough, in part because of variation between subjects. The academy is working hard to make further improvements in 2009 through intervention and other strategies including mentoring, breakfast clubs and away-days that are helping to create a climate where students want to achieve. Many Year 11 students intend to continue in education or training next year.

The academy has developed suitable systems for setting targets and tracking students' progress. The assistant principals have an overview of the progress of the students in their 'colleges'. Where the academy's analysis is weaker is in the strategic interpretation of the data and what it potentially reveals about the quality of teaching and the curriculum.

Personal development and well-being

Students are proud of their new academy and of the opportunities which it offers. They like the 'college' structure which enables them to get to know students in other year groups. Students believe that their views are considered through the 'student voice' programme and have some opportunities to exercise responsibility. There is an elected school council but its impact on the academy's development has yet to be felt.

Behaviour in and around the academy is satisfactory. Students make sensible use of the small playground space currently available to them. There is some occasional boisterousness in corridors, mostly after the lunchtime break. While most students behave well in lessons, low-level disruption impedes learning in some classes.

Although higher than in the predecessor school, attendance for 2007/08 was very low at 88.2%. The academy, with firm support from governors, has introduced a raft of appropriate initiatives to improve it, including the issuing of fixed-penalty notices. Assemblies and tutorial sessions emphasise links between regular attendance, good learning outcomes and students' future career prospects. Improved attendance is encouraged by rewards which also celebrate those whose attendance is already good. These approaches have led to a rise in attendance which stands at 90.2% to date this academic year. Nevertheless, it remains too low. It is strongest in Year 7 and weakest in Years 10 and 11 where there are a high number of persistent absentees. The academy has recently raised its expectations of students' punctuality at the start of the day. On the first day of the inspection, 34 students arrived late. There is also some lack of punctuality between lessons.

Fixed-term exclusions have risen slightly this year, mainly due to the firmer stance against students smoking. Useful intervention programmes aim to improve the behaviour of those whose conduct is unacceptable.

Quality of provision

Teaching was good in around two fifths of the 36 lessons observed, satisfactory in just under a half and inadequate in one sixth. The quality of learning lagged a little behind the teaching mainly because of students' weak skills in speaking, listening and independent learning. Students were often passive learners with many showing reluctance to participate in discussions. This was exacerbated in many lessons where teachers dominated the talk or made too little use of targeted, purposeful and

searching questions. Opportunities to develop students' speaking skills were also missed in tutor group sessions.

The best teaching was characterised by brisk pace and high expectations of students' behaviour and what they might achieve. Teachers' good subject knowledge was reflected in their use of specialist vocabulary and skilful questioning that enabled them to assess and reinforce learning, maintain students' attention and encourage students to develop their thinking. Learning objectives were explained clearly so that students fully understood what was expected of them. Praise was used effectively to reinforce good behaviour and encourage students to contribute. Strategies such as collaborative working and learning partners promoted discussion and aided the development of understanding.

In the satisfactory lessons, there were generally good relationships between staff and students. Students' prior knowledge was often built upon well in introductions to lessons. Although teachers' planning followed the academy's agreed format, some was insufficiently detailed, lacking information, for example, on how the needs of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities were to be met or the more able challenged. Additional adults were mostly well deployed. On occasion, strategies for managing behaviour were not effective in curbing inattention and low-level disruption, and the rate of learning slowed.

Where teaching was inadequate, expectations of students were not high enough and low-level disruption was allowed to persist. In two lessons, closer supervision of students was required.

The quality of marking varied: some was infrequent. While most teachers praised students' work, not all indicated the next steps to take in order to improve. Too little attention is routinely given to students' presentation of their work.

A number of initiatives have enhanced the curriculum and made it more responsive to local circumstances and individual students' needs and aspirations. The academy recognises that the weak literacy skills of many students are a potential barrier to their access to other subjects in the curriculum and a director of literacy was appointed at the start of the academic year to address this. Groups of less able Key Stage 3 students are given additional lessons in literacy: assessment records show their progress is improving. Students' skills in speaking and listening require attention too.

Productive links with primary schools are aiding students' transition to the academy which has continued with the predecessor school's skills-based curriculum programme (STAR) for students in Year 7. This aims to encourage their independent learning and growing sense of responsibility by focusing on 'mind friendly' learning techniques that can be applied to a wider range of learning situations. The programme is being reviewed to meet better the needs of the academy's changing intake. Senior leaders are aware of the potential benefits of using such techniques in

all lessons to increase the rate of students' progress and their active engagement in learning. Key Stage 3 schemes of work have been revised to promote a wider range of learning strategies.

The Key Stage 4 curriculum offers a range of courses and types of qualifications. Senior leaders are committed to reviewing and adapting the curriculum further to expand the range of options to meet the needs of all students. Vocational options include off-site provision through links with other local providers. Good support is provided for a group of vulnerable students in Year 11 through the 'Pathways' programme which seeks to keep these students in education. Skilled learning mentors focus on students' pastoral and learning needs.

The academy has made a positive start in developing its specialisms, prioritising science in the first instance. Students benefit from science clubs, inter-college weekly quizzes, activity days and enrichment programmes. Participation in single science subjects at GCSE has increased and there are 'fast track' science groups in Years 7 and 10. The academy is due to lead the development of provision for the new science diploma within the local authority area. It is beginning to establish the specialism as a feature of its wider work within the community, for instance the popular liaison activities with local primary schools. The business and enterprise specialism is less well established. Recent developments include Year 7 'form companies' in which students design, produce and sell items within the academy and in local markets. This represents a particular challenge, as business and enterprise are underdeveloped concepts for many students.

The academy's extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities make a positive contribution to students' personal development and enjoyment. All staff are involved in providing a wide range of activities during the weekly 'enrichment sessions' which are taught in mixed-age groups. The academy's innovative approach collates the sessions in 'Every Child Matters' themes, with the expectation that students will cover all strands over time. A similar approach is taken to residential trips and visits, tutorial groups and a number of 'Challenge Activities' and themed events.

Leadership and management

The principal is well supported by an enthusiastic and energetic senior team comprised of the vice-principal and five assistant principals. They each work hard on their whole-academy areas of responsibility but vary in their understanding of how the areas interrelate: for example, how the quality of teaching and the curriculum affect behaviour and attendance. Each assistant principal also oversees a 'college', a system seen as a strength by students and staff alike. So far, the focus for senior leaders has been to raise standards, particularly at Key Stage 4. They have adopted a wide range of strategies to boost performance but now need to couple this with a systematic approach to improving the quality of teaching and learning across the academy. At present, leadership is predominantly centred around reaction to immediate pressures to raise standards and a whole-hearted desire to see Year 11

students succeed. The crucial next step is to take a more strategic view that builds capacity for improvement that is sustainable over time. While development planning for the academy and within faculties follows a common format, it has several important weaknesses. In particular, aims and success criteria are confused with actions, and arrangements for monitoring and evaluation are not specified.

The quality of middle level leadership varies but there are examples of strong practice; for instance in a head of faculty's high calibre monitoring, feedback and support for teachers. The 'leadership forum', an extended leadership group, has the potential to be a driving force in improving the quality of provision. Line management arrangements are appropriate: regular meetings provide a suitable mechanism for support and challenge. Quality assurance arrangements include the monitoring of the teaching of all staff and a rolling programme of in-depth monitoring of faculties. This informs the academy's self-evaluation which is broadly accurate. While management structures are suitable, there is a need to ensure that their use is underpinned by a clear understanding of responsibility and accountability at all levels and consistently high expectations of all staff.

The governing board gives good support to the academy, for instance through its robust stance on students' absence. The principal reports that governors also provide challenge on all aspects of the academy's work but minutes of meeting do not record this adequately. Questions raised by the principal's reports or the assistant principals' college reports are not noted in the minutes and no action points stemming from them are recorded.

The move to the new building has lifted morale across the academy. The vast majority of staff engaged constructively in discussion with inspectors, showing a preparedness to reflect on and improve their practice. This supports the academy's capacity for improvement, which is satisfactory. Recent professional development opportunities have focused largely on information and communication technology (ICT) and behaviour for learning. Newly qualified teachers are well supported, having both a curriculum mentor and one who guides their wider professional development. More widely, though, there is no systematic drive to raise the quality of teaching.

The Sixth Form

Students are enjoying the sixth form and particularly appreciate the small class sizes and the fact that they know the teachers well. The prior attainment of students is below that generally found in school sixth forms. Having set appropriate criteria for entry to the sixth form, the academy has allowed some flexibility in the first year of its existence. This inclusive approach is partly in response to needs within the local area where the proportion of 16-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training is relatively high. The academy is committed to enabling as many students as possible to enter the sixth form. Students' views were taken into consideration when setting up this year's AS and A-level courses. As a result, some have

exceptionally small numbers of students, and the academy is running these as 'loss leaders' in the drive to market and develop its sixth-form provision from a standing start.

Vocational options in the sixth form include qualifications in fashion design, sport, ICT, business studies and performing arts. The academy's specialism is reflected well in the high proportion of students studying biology, chemistry and environmental science. Some students are also re-sitting GCSE English language and mathematics. A newly introduced tracking system is beginning to be used by leaders and subject teachers. The director of sixth form is confident that this will allow more rigorous monitoring of students' targets and achievements, and enable more effective links between pastoral and academic guidance.

The director of sixth form has an accurate view of the strengths and developmental needs of the newly-established sixth form through his continuous monitoring and self-evaluation. Students' views are taken into account when leaders are reviewing aspects of the curriculum, teaching and guidance. Useful policies and guidance for staff, many of whom are new to teaching post-16 courses, have been provided, along with professional development and training activities to improve teachers' levels of expertise. Leaders acknowledge that there is more to do to ensure that teachers consistently provide sufficiently challenging work which meets the needs of students across the full range of ability. Not all students are equally capable of independent study skills and some lack the organisational skills and maturity to take more responsibility for their own learning. This has been recognised and there is a determined drive to improve the rigour of pastoral and academic guidance in order to provide an appropriately challenging and mature 'sixth-form learning culture'.

External support

The academy makes good use of external partners, including the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust and the local authority (LA) to improve the quality of its work. The reports from the school improvement partner are detailed, acknowledging where improvement has been made but also identifying where leaders need to place greater emphasis. Consultants have been involved in developing senior leaders' skills. The academy buys in tailored help from the LA, for example supporting work in ICT and in mathematics.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise the quality of teaching and learning.
- Develop students' skills in speaking and listening.

- Sharpen the quality of development planning.
- Establish a mature yet vibrant learning culture in the sixth form.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector