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Mr Gareth Dawkins
Principal
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Dear Mr Dawkins

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Bradford Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Eric Craven HMI and Mike McIlroy HMI to your academy on 25 and 26 February 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 27 lessons, one assembly and one home team session; scrutinised documents; and met with the principal, groups of staff, groups of learners, and representatives of the governing board.

Context

Following the closure of its predecessor school, Bradford Academy opened in September 2007 in a new building: learners and almost all staff transferred. Currently oversubscribed, it is an average-sized secondary school with a small and rapidly growing sixth form. There are more boys than girls on roll. The academy serves an area of very considerable social and economic disadvantage. The proportion of learners eligible for free school meals is high compared with the national average. About two thirds of the learners are White British with one third from a range of minority ethnic groups, the largest of which is Pakistani. A significant number of recent international arrivals from Eastern Europe have joined the academy. About a quarter of the learners speak English as an additional language and 10% are at an early stage of learning English. The proportion of

students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is twice the national average, as is the number with statements of special educational need. The academy makes special provision for 25 physically disabled learners some of whom are profoundly disabled. The academy has a higher than usual number of looked after children on its roll. The academy, which has a specialism in citizenship with enterprise, opened under the sponsorship of the Diocese of Bradford and Tost. The academy is receiving support from the National Challenge programme because its 2008 GCSE results were below the government's floor targets.

Achievement and standards

The academy's first GCSE results in 2008 show that by the end of Key Stage 4, standards are low overall. Twenty five per cent of learners gained five or more GCSE passes at grades A*-C but only 18% reached this threshold with both English and mathematics. On both measures, the academy's performance is below the government's floor targets. Almost all learners left with at least one GCSE level pass but too few, only 75%, gained five or more GCSE level passes. The strongest performance was in English, particularly literature, with 55% of learners gaining a grade C or above. The weakest performance was in science where only 13% reached this threshold. A number of factors limited the performance of this cohort of learners, most notably a legacy of significant underachievement. The results represent an improvement on the performance of the predecessor school. The academy's analysis of the Key Stage 4 results indicates that learners made broadly satisfactory progress in English and mathematics given their starting points on entry. There was considerable variation in achievement across other subjects.

The academy's increasingly robust tracking system, results of GCSE modular examinations and evaluations of first certificate and diploma course portfolios, indicate that GCSE results should rise in 2009. The academy is likely to exceed the government's floor targets on some measures.

Unvalidated data show that the results of the Key Stage 3 national tests in 2008 were well below average in English and mathematics and low in science. The proportion of learners reaching the higher Level 6 was low in all three core subjects. Nevertheless, the academy's records show that given their well below average attainment on entry, learners made satisfactory progress in English and mathematics. Their achievement in science was inadequate. The academy's tracking data indicate that current rates of progress in Key Stage 3 are increasing gradually as a consequence of improved teaching and support. The academy's 2009 targets in the core subjects are likely to be met at the expected Level 5, although not at the higher Level 6.

The academy has put a number of strategies and structures in place to raise standards and improve learners' progress. Staffing difficulties, which were limiting improvements in mathematics and causing a significant decline in performance in science, have been addressed. The academy's monitoring shows that the quality of

provision in both these subjects has improved. Based on learners' prior attainment, demanding individual targets are set in all subjects. Progress towards these is assessed regularly and tracked rigorously. Where learners are falling behind, help is carefully targeted to overcome barriers in learning and hasten progress. For some Year 11 learners whose progress has stalled or been restricted by absence or shortfalls in coursework, the Excellence Centre provides tailored individual support to bring them back on track. Learners are positive about the help they receive in the centre and the impact this has on increasing their motivation and raising their confidence.

A significant proportion of learners join the academy in Year 7 with limited literacy skills which hinder their access to the curriculum. An intensive programme focused on knowledge of phonics has been established. It is enhanced through the work of the learning resource centre which provides a range of engaging ways of building a reading culture. In addition, the Year 7 foundation curriculum provides considerable opportunities for the application and consolidation of literacy skills. Regular assessments indicate that these measures are raising overall levels of literacy in Year 7 and having a particularly positive impact on learners' writing skills. Beyond Year 7, there is a strong emphasis on equipping learners with appropriate subject specific vocabulary.

The first year of the academy's operation saw the opening of a small sixth form with a cohort of learners whose attainment on entry was lower than that usually found in school sixth forms. Fifty learners were entered for a range of qualifications in 2008, the majority of which were at level 2. Learners following only level 2 courses were successful in gaining high grades. Standards at level 3 were well below average. Overall, current post-16 learners are making at least satisfactory progress towards reaching their challenging targets at both levels 2 and 3.

Personal development and well-being

Most learners are generally well behaved both in class and as they move around the academy. Occasional boisterousness in corridors and smoking in the grounds by older learners are tackled swiftly by staff. Exclusions have reduced sharply since the last academic year due to an increasing range of effective measures designed to monitor and improve behaviour. These include an internal exclusion unit, an off-site unit and staff buddying arrangements. The improvement in behaviour is reflected in the respect learners show for the academy's resources and well cared for building. In lessons, most learners are generally attentive but the concentration of some slips and the resulting low level disruption is not always corrected swiftly. Consequently, overall behaviour is satisfactory.

Attendance is very low: in the last academic year it was only 85.6% with some 20% of learners absent persistently. There has been some small improvement since the beginning of the current academic year but overall attendance remains too low. It is weakest in Year 11 but is encouragingly stronger in Years 7 and 8. Younger learners have responded well to a range of measures designed to improve attendance such

as financial rewards, certificates and opportunities to go on trips. Learners whose attendance is already good appreciate the recognition and rewards they receive. The academy reports that punctuality at the start of the day is improving. Punctuality between lessons is good.

Learners consider themselves to be safe in the academy. Whilst acknowledging that there is some bullying, learners are adamant that it is tackled promptly and effectively. The few racist incidents are handled with similar efficiency and success. Learners have satisfactory attitudes to learning. They work well together when asked to do so but their independent learning skills are less well developed. Many approach learning passively but respond enthusiastically in the best lessons where they are keen to answer questions and make good contributions.

Learners have good opportunities to exercise responsibility. A considerable number have been involved in the 'student voice' programme, a prominent feature of the academy's specialist work. Arising from this, a student council has recently been formed following an inclusive election process which saw high rates of participation by learners. Some learners have been involved in interviewing new staff and others in giving their view on the quality of lessons. Sixth formers have the opportunity to mentor younger students and all Year 7 learners have the chance to act as academy ambassadors in the course of their first year at the academy.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory overall: an increasing proportion is good. No unsatisfactory teaching was observed during the visit. Teaching is characterised by good relationships between learners and adults, good use of the academy planning format and effective use of data which enables staff to be well informed about the strengths and weaknesses of learners. Additional adults are well deployed to support learners, particularly those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Where teaching is at its strongest it is lively, energetic and fast-paced with interesting activities that both capture and retain learners' attention. An example of this was a good Year 8 science lesson on how to test and calculate the speed of moving objects: prior learning was briskly revised using the interactive whiteboard before swiftly moving onto an engrossing practical experiment that involved all learners. Learning objectives are clear, concise and easily understood by learners and electronic whiteboards are used well to provide colourful, interactive activities. Behaviour management strategies are applied consistently to ensure that learners listen well and remain on task. Work is challenging and matched to learners' different abilities. Effective questioning is well used to reinforce prior learning, to check on how well new learning has been understood and to ensure wide participation in lessons. Learners' progress is at its best when they are fully engaged in lessons.

Where teaching is satisfactory, common features are mundane activities, a slower pace and inefficient use of time. Too many learners are allowed to remain off-task for too long. Although planned for, work is not always matched to learners' different abilities and opportunities to challenge learners and extend their learning are not fully or imaginatively exploited. Learning objectives and what is expected of learners are not always made clear. Questioning is often too reliant on those learners who are willing to answer. In some lessons, teaching is too teacher-centred. Learning is supported by homework, although this is not always consistently set.

The curriculum is satisfactory and improving. It has been evaluated well and is being increasingly matched to learners' needs and aspirations. Good work is taking place to ensure learners have access and choice. This is being cemented in place through better information, advice and guidance arrangements that are being linked closely to learners' regular progress update reviews. Planning for learning pathways is advanced in some subjects. These pathways enable learners to make early choices and give opportunities for them to broaden their learning or focus on particular strands as they wish.

The Year 7 foundation curriculum has a much needed focus on literacy and numeracy as well as learners' personal and social skills. For almost half the week and for most subjects learners have the same teacher. The academy's records show that learners in Year 7 make on average more than the expected rate of progress in writing and that attendance is highest in Year 7. These successes are in part because of this helpful induction into the academy. Reflecting the academy's specialism, personal, social, health and citizenship education (PSHCE) is suitably prominent in the curriculum. It is helpfully delivered in part through the home team programme as well as dedicated lessons. The common lesson planning format encourages teachers to identify links between PSHCE and other subjects.

There is appropriate provision for learners who are, or are likely to become, disengaged. For example, a nurture group operates in Year 8 for a small number of disaffected learners; the academy purchases off-site provision for some groups of learners and arranges bespoke provision for certain individual learners to try and sustain them in education. There is an extensive extra-curricular programme which offers sports and leisure activities as well as opportunities to reinforce and extend learning in some subjects. However, the academy is not yet in a position to judge the full effectiveness of these activities as it is still to gather and analyse learners' participation rates. The curriculum in the sixth form is suitably matched to the range of learners' needs, prior attainment and aspirations. There are collaborative arrangements developing with partner institutions to broaden the curriculum offer.

The care and support provided for learners are good. The academy's multi-professional team is effective in providing appropriate support for learners in need from its own range of expertise but it also draws upon other agencies as required so that there is a wide array of responses at hand. The pastoral arrangements, which include non-teaching pastoral support workers and learning guides who are

teachers, make a good contribution to the effectiveness of care and support. In the main, learners value the opportunities to be teamed with those from different year groups, although some of the older learners say they find the activities provided in the home teams are targeted more towards the younger learners. Learners are positive about the academy, how it is improving and the ways it contributes to their personal and social development. They say that they are treated respectfully and that those with different needs and cultural backgrounds mix well and are given equal opportunities to participate.

There are effective induction arrangements for those learners who are at the early stages of learning English. The academy augments its own provision by enlisting support from the local authority to assess these learners' needs and to provide the support they require. The academy reports that learners who speak English as an additional language make better progress in practical subjects but also recognises that more analyses of the progress being made by different groups of these learners is needed in order to be clear if they are all making suitable progress in all subjects.

Learners with physical disabilities get good support in terms of specialised or adapted resources and from learning support staff to help them gain access to the curriculum. There is good liaison between learning support staff and the physical education department to ensure that these learners have appropriate, enjoyable and challenging physical education experiences. Those learners needing additional support get this through an effective mix of in-class and withdrawal support from learning support staff who are developing their roles in helping learners with their learning as well as meeting their care needs. The academy is in the process of moving from a system of individual learning plans to one where provision maps are used to show how the needs of different groups and individuals with learning or behavioural needs will be met. This work is promising but is in its infancy so it is too early to judge its effectiveness. The academy finds it is difficult to judge the progress being made by those learners with the most pronounced learning difficulties and/or disabilities because its assessments are not yet sufficiently refined to measure the small steps of progress many of these learners make. Senior staff have well considered plans to introduce more suitable assessments for these learners.

Safeguarding arrangements meet statutory requirements. Staff are suitably vetted before commencing work at the academy and risk assessments are made for the many academy activities and trips out. Senior staff have ensured all staff receive child protection training.

The academic guidance learners receive is satisfactory and developing well. The academy is improving its arrangements and emphasis on information, advice and guidance given to learners when choosing their options. However, some departments are more advanced than others in this development. Learners are aware of their target grades and levels and the regular progress update reviews, to which they make a full contribution, help them understand the progress they are

making. The quality of marking is improving as staff take on-board the assessment training they are receiving. The best ensures learners are given specific improvement targets when their work is marked but this is inconsistent.

Leadership and management

The vision and strong ambition for the academy are clearly articulated by its principal. He is tenacious in the implementation of plans for its development and the establishment of its distinctive ethos. Supported by a capable and dedicated senior team, he has gained the commitment of staff to the academy's aims and been decisive in tackling practice which does not accord with these. There is synergy between the academy's core values and its specialism which weaves the latter through its work. This is exemplified by the respectful working relationships between staff and learners; the opportunities for learners to express their views and have these taken into account; and the development of community through the vertical home team system. A new uniform, consistently high expectations, and the firm implementation of rewards and sanctions are all significant factors in establishing and embedding a sense of belonging and security which the majority of learners welcome. Nevertheless, learners' levels of attendance and rates of persistent absence continue to be thorny issues for the academy.

Learning is at the heart of the academy both for learners and staff. Coherent and well-considered management systems focus relentlessly on the academic progress and personal development needs of individual learners. The impact of this can be seen in, for instance, rising standards, improved behaviour and more positive attitudes to learning. A regular training programme for staff matched to the academy's direction of travel, as well as the specific development needs of individual staff, runs throughout the year. Robust quality assurance systems inform this as provision and performance are monitored and evaluated. Performance management is in place, although not fully developed. The academy's analysis of its strengths and areas for development is sharply focused and leaders are resolute in the drive for rapid but well rooted improvement. Development planning is crisp with a tight review cycle.

A culture of accountability is firmly in place. A rigorous line management system ensures that middle leaders, all of whom are relatively recent appointments, are supported and challenged to raise standards and improve the quality of provision. Training has taken place so that they are equipped to quality assure their areas of responsibility and plan for improvement. The effectiveness of leadership at this level is variable with some newly formed teams in place. However, the academy can demonstrate the improved impact of teams, for instance in mathematics.

The leadership of the sixth form is integrated into that of the academy as a whole. Management structures mirror those for other key stages. At present, this is fit for purpose but senior leaders recognise the need to develop a team with specialised skills as the sixth form grows in size and the complexity of demand increases.

Members of the governing board have a broad range of pertinent skills and experience that enable them to make a good contribution to the leadership of the academy. They are well informed about the academy's progress and challenge its work thoroughly.

The academy's clear sense of direction, its establishment of comprehensive and coherent management systems, improvements in the quality of provision along with good care and support indicate that it has good capacity to improve.

External support

The academy drew effectively on external support to strengthen its leadership capacity in its first year of operation. It has commissioned support to evaluate the quality of provision as well as tailored training to equip staff to make the necessary improvements. There is a good level of critical dialogue with the National Challenge adviser.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise standards and improve learners' progress overall, and particularly in science, by increasing the proportion of lessons that are good or better.
- Ensure that work is more consistently matched to students' learning needs so that all are suitably challenged.
- Reduce levels of persistent absence and improve attendance.

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 Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF