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Mr Marcus Barker
Principal
Ashcroft Technology Academy
100 West Hill
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Dear Mr Barker

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Ashcroft Technology Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Peter Gale HMI to your academy on 27 and 28 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, senior staff, middle leaders, groups of students and the chair of the management committee. Informal discussions were held with other members of staff and students.

Context

Ashcroft Technology Academy has 1,077 students, including 168 in the sixth form. Around 40% are from a White British background and the remainder come from a variety of minority ethnic groups. The proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals is well above average and higher in Year 7 than in other year groups. Around one in eight of the students speak English as a second language but very few are at the early stages of learning English. The proportion of students who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities is similar to that in most secondary schools but the proportion who have a statement of special education needs is below the national average. The academy has previously experienced difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified and experienced staff in science and modern foreign languages. A number of recent initiatives have been limited by unavoidable delays in the building programme. The new performing arts and special needs centre, including the specialist autistic resource centre, is planned to open in spring 2009 and there is an expectation that the new sixth form centre will be open in autumn 2009.

Achievement and standards

Older students joined the predecessor school with attainment that was generally slightly above average. The academy's admission arrangements have resulted in the overall attainment of students in Year 7 being slightly below average.

At GCSE level, the academy's challenging targets were met. The proportion of students who achieved five or more A* to C grades in 2008, including mathematics and English, was significantly above average at 68% and those students achieved well in relation to their starting points.

Sixth form students in Year 12 did not make the progress they should have in 2008 but the performance of those in Year 13 was better and their achievement, although below the national average, shows that they made good progress in relation to their starting points.

Inspection evidence and the academy's own assessment information demonstrate that most students are on track to achieve their realistic and challenging targets and appropriate action is being taken to address any underperformance. The academy's technology specialisms of design technology and information and communications technology (ICT) are contributing to students' motivation. For example, early entry for ICT accreditation gives students additional confidence in their abilities.

Personal development and well-being

Relationships are good at all levels. Students have good relationships with each other and with the adults they work with. Similarly, relationships between different ethnic and religious groups are harmonious. Students say that they feel safe and well supported and they know who to turn to if they have a problem. Students move purposefully between lessons and respect their environment. Behaviour in lessons and around the academy is generally very good. However, a very small minority of students, particularly in the younger age groups, do not live up to the academy's high expectations in terms of their behaviour. These students are being challenged effectively and their behaviour is improving. Attitudes to learning are generally positive, as was demonstrated by a Year 10 group discussing peer pressure in sexual relationships in a thoughtful and mature manner. Students enjoy learning and most have good attendance. Systems developed by the academy have improved both attendance and punctuality. The senior team recognises that punctuality in lessons can be adversely affected by the current structure of the academy day and changes are planned which should alleviate some of these difficulties. Students have an opportunity to contribute to their own and to the wider community but say they would welcome more opportunities to be involved in improving their learning.

Quality of provision

The curriculum is under constant review and ever evolving to meet the needs of the students more precisely. It is particularly effective in providing good opportunities for

students to develop work-based skills. Team working is a strong element of many lessons. For example, students in a Year 10 lesson worked together effectively to make measurements for speed, distance and time calculations. The sixth form is relatively small and this inevitably restricts the range of courses that are available. The academy is seeking to develop the sixth form curriculum carefully to ensure that it meets students' needs and aspirations in a cost-effective manner.

Teaching and learning are good. The large majority of teaching seen was good, with some lessons that had outstanding features. Most learners make good progress because teachers have good subject knowledge and plan lessons to provide a variety of different learning opportunities. In the best lessons, teachers carefully monitor students' progress and use questioning effectively to help them develop their understanding. Where progress is slower, work is sometimes not well matched to the needs of the least and the most able students, and the pace of lessons can be slow because activities are too teacher-directed and teachers spend too long on their introductions.

The academy cares very well for its students. Systems for safeguarding students are robust and effective. Students say that they get good guidance and support through a strong tutor system and those in the sixth form are particularly appreciative of the good guidance they receive for making choices about the next steps in their learning or employment. Student progress managers support students' learning effectively and manage targeted interventions. Teaching assistants are well deployed and provide good support for individual students. Learning mentors are engaged in reducing barriers to learning by, for example, supporting improvement in student behaviour.

Students have challenging individual targets, which are well known to them. In some subjects, teachers provide good-quality verbal and written feedback on how students can improve and develop their work in order to meet their targets. However, this is inconsistent across and within subject areas.

Leadership and management

The academy is successfully focused on improving outcomes for students. Those responsible for leading and managing the academy at a senior level have an accurate picture of its strengths and areas for development. The academy is developing a distinctive ethos, which strongly values an inclusive and cohesive community. The executive board and the principal set a very clear direction for improvement. Monitoring of all aspects of the academy's work is accurate and evaluation is based on secure evidence and leads to correct priorities for improvement. There is some variability in middle leadership which the academy has been working to address. Some middle leaders have been effective in developing appropriate systems to improve provision and outcomes for students in their areas of responsibility. Others have been less effective in promoting consistent and sustained improvement. The development of robust internal systems to promote pride in the academy and raise self-esteem have been effective in improving



attendance and punctuality, reducing exclusions and reducing the incidence of inappropriate behaviour. The impact of the actions taken demonstrates a good capacity for further improvement.

External support

The academy has made good use of external consultants to validate and inform the evaluation of its own performance.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Empower and enable all middle leaders to develop consistently good practice across their areas of responsibility.
- Improve the use of assessment so that tasks and activities are carefully matched to the needs of different groups and provide students with good-quality guidance on how they can improve or develop their work.

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

Yours sincerely

Robert Ellis
H M Inspector

cc chair of the executive board
the Academies Group, DCSF