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Dr C Gerry
The Executive Principal
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Dear Dr Gerry

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Cornwallis Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Susan Frater HMI and Robert Pyner 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 head of the academy, the executive principal, nominated staff, the chair of governors, a representative of the sponsors and groups of students.

Context

Cornwallis Academy is part of a hard federation with New Line Learning Academy. Cornwallis Academy opened in September 2007 with specialisms in science and design and technology. The academy is a non-selective school. An executive principal and vice principal provide strategic leadership for both academies. The academy is led on a day-to-day basis by a head of school, who took post in September 2008, and the senior leadership team. A new building is currently under construction, but the academy does not expect to move into it until September 2010.

There are 1290 students on roll in Years 7 to 11 and 283 students in the sixth form. Most of the students are of White British origin. A small number of students speak



English as an additional language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is low, as is the proportion who have a learning difficulty or disability. Attainment on entry is in line with national averages.

Achievement and standards

In the last eighteen months, since the opening of the academy, staff have been successful in creating a positive learning environment. Good improvement has been made in the progress students make across the academy with rising standards, particularly in the GCSE examinations. The main factors underpinning improvements in achievement and standards are: the creation of a curriculum that is flexible and meets students' needs, their interests and aspirations; the academy's careful and transparent checking of students' progress leading to well targeted intervention programmes for those at risk of underachieving; and, the monitoring and support from senior leaders for middle managers in the drive to raise achievement. Given that on entry attainment is in line with national averages, the 2008 results for Key Stage 4 show that students made good overall progress. Good progress was made in English but was less marked in mathematics. Generally, the progress made by boys and girls was good, although a small group of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities made less progress than could be expected.

The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C rose from 69% in 2007 in the predecessor school to 76% in 2008 which exceeded the challenging target set. The proportion of students gaining five good passes at GCSE including English and mathematics increased in 2008 to 48% and is now in line with the national average, but was below the target set by the academy. Standards by the end of Key Stage 4, overall, are above average. These results reflect the flexibility the academy has developed with early entry for examinations in Year 10 and the opportunity this creates for students to develop their learning and undertake additional courses leading to qualifications. However, the results show relative underperformance in communication studies, design and technology, social studies and science. Given that design and technology and science are the academy's specialist subjects, the 2008 results were disappointing. Senior staff have taken action to improve performance in these subjects. Leadership and management are now secure in science and intervention is ongoing in design and technology, with the result that the academy's progress tracking data indicates that results should be higher in 2009. However, the pace of improvement in the specialist subjects is too slow, particularly in design and technology where intervention to improve leadership has not yet had sufficient impact.

Students undertake the Key Stage 3 curriculum in two years rather than three. Teachers' assessment data shows that in 2008 students' performance in the unvalidated national tests improved significantly, particularly in English.

Year 11 students at the academy are a part of the sixth form. Outcomes at AS-level examinations show standards that have improved since 2007 but were lower than predicted. Standards at A level show good progress and were well above predictions.

All students achieved at least a pass grade. Tracking data shows a continuing and improving trend in students' performance.

Personal development and well-being

The personal development and well-being of students are key strengths of the academy. Strong relationships with teachers promote students' maturity and confidence. Their behaviour in lessons and around the school is good and students thrive when given opportunities to take responsibility for their learning. They are very loyal to the academy and feel strongly that it has improved. An additional indication of improving behaviour is the clear reduction in the number of fixed term exclusions. Evidence of students' positive attitudes and enjoyment of learning are further supported by the clear improvement in attendance. Sixth form students have good opportunities to develop a range of independent learning skills. They participate in business challenges, raise funds for charities, and act as mentors to younger students. The skills they develop through these activities, together with support for university application and employment workshops, prepare them well for future study and employment.

Quality of provision

Senior managers have been successful in improving the quality of teaching. Perceptive and regular monitoring of teaching and learning and good professional development for staff are further strengthening practice. However, the academy is missing opportunities to improve teaching further by sharing the outstanding practice that exists at the academy.

In the most effective lessons teaching is briskly paced and well planned. High expectations of behaviour, clear learning goals and extremely good relationships contribute to students making good, and sometimes outstanding, progress in lessons. Teachers have good subject knowledge and students value the energy and enthusiasm that teachers exhibit in lessons and greatly appreciate the constant support and encouragement they receive. In many lessons, teaching is good because students are actively involved in their learning. Teachers' questioning is used well to share students' ideas, to stimulate discussion and to allow further development of thought, but sometimes teachers do not always ensure that students give extended answers or use vocabulary which is of sufficiently high level.

In the less effective lessons, teachers do not always manage students' behaviour to ensure students remain focused on tasks. Occasionally, teachers keep too rigidly to their lesson plans and do not use assessment opportunities to increase the pace of learning to challenge students or slow it down to aid understanding.

The curriculum is inclusive and ensures that all groups of students are able to participate fully and develop as well rounded individuals. At Key Stage 3, students study the full National Curriculum in two years and embark on more personalised pathways in Years 9 to 11, and in the sixth form. This results in the good standards

achieved in GCSE examinations. Students appreciate the lap top computers provided by the academy which they use well to develop their independent learning skills and enable staff to assess students' work directly on line. There is provision for about a tenth of Year 11 students to take part in work related pathways which adds to the flexibility of the curriculum to meet the needs of individuals. Students report that they enjoy the subjects they study and appreciate the opportunities to learn a range of subjects for qualifications at different levels which meet individual needs.

The addition of Year 11 into the sixth form enables students to start AS courses early and supports their retention into Year 12. Retention from Year 12 to Year 13 has improved and is good. Careers guidance is excellent and the majority of students progress to further or higher education.

Students' progress towards their targets is monitored through the on line student profile system and any cause for concern is identified and addressed effectively by staff. The profile provides good guidance to students on improving their work.

Leadership and management

The head of school provides strong leadership which is clearly focused on raising standards and promoting the well-being of learners. He has a clear vision for the school and has created a common sense of purpose amongst staff. Talents are nurtured, initiatives from staff welcomed, and academic research is used well to develop new ideas. An effective process of self-evaluation, including lesson observations, has been established. This has begun to have a positive impact on students' achievement and the quality of teaching and learning. However, the impact of this is not yet evident across all departments particularly in the specialist subjects. The senior leaders are a cohesive team; they know the priorities for the future, and what needs to be done to transform their vision for sustaining high achievement into action. The management systems enable them to have open discussions about professional development and the academy's progress.

A committed and loyal team of middle managers supports the academy's vision very well. Their detailed self-evaluation and development plans have been key factors in developing their capacity for further improvement. The managers are working hard to limit the barriers to engagement and motivate students in reaching their potential. Heads of departments are challenging inadequate practice and providing support to remedy the weaknesses.

The governing body effectively supports the academy through regular communication on strategic and operational matters in order to ensure that the progress and quality of the academy's work remains on track.

External support

The academy benefits from the input of the School Improvement Partner, who has a robust, accurate view of its work. The head of the school has commissioned a

number of external reviews and is working closely with consultants to raise standards further.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve teaching and learning in order to raise achievement and standards in the specialist subjects.

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

Kekshan Salaria
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF