

Cambridge Education
Demeter House
Station Road
Cambridge
CB1 2RS

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

Direct T 01223 578500
Direct F 01223 578501
risp.inspections@camb-ed.com



11 May 2009

Mr Patrick Hannaway
Principal
Barnfield South Academy
Cutenhoe Road
Luton
Bedfordshire
LU1 3NH

Dear Mr Hannaway

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Barnfield South Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with John Mitcheson HMI to Barnfield South Academy, Luton on 7 and 8 May 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.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, the Chairman of the Board of Directors and main sponsor, associate principal, other senior staff responsible for leading on curriculum developments, professional development and student support in addition to meetings with staff in charge of various aspects of leadership within the academy. Inspectors also met with representatives of external agencies, including the Local Authority officer for the gifted and talented and others able to comment on the impact of external support. Staff observed and attended meetings with the inspectors alongside groups of students, including the Academy Council members.

The inspection team observed 19 lessons representative of all year groups and 14 subjects (including some in collaboration with academy staff), assemblies and tutor sessions. A wide range of documentation was considered, including two presentations on behalf of the academy, strategic planning documents and departmental and student monitoring.

Context

Barnfield South Academy opened in September 2007 for students aged 11-16 following the closure of the predecessor school. It currently uses the same buildings as the predecessor school but new buildings are anticipated to be open in early 2011. It forms part of a federation with its sponsor, Barnfield College, and another academy, Barnfield West, and is part of a wider consortium for Campus Luton that provides planning and delivery of the 14-19 curriculum. The premises have been refurbished thoughtfully whilst awaiting a move into the new building.

The academy is non selective and serves a local community which has a mix of ethnicities. The academy itself has a student population of which around half are of white British heritage and almost one in five are of Pakistani background. The rest of the academy student population is a mix from over 10 different backgrounds. It is smaller than most schools with 815 students on roll, but was also over subscribed with applications for entry in September 2009 and numbers are expected to grow.

The proportion of students who are entitled to free school meals is high at over twice the national average and is currently almost a third of all students. Students with additional learning difficulties and disabilities is also well above national average at 29%. Student mobility is high with a high proportion of students joining the academy later than in Year 7. The profile of the intake is also changing with a gentle rise in the proportion of students who speak English as an additional language. Attendance is now close to national averages as a result of recent improvements. The academy has three specialisms in performing arts, Information Technology (IT) and Enterprise.

The academy has employed almost 80% of its staff from those who worked in the predecessor school. Recruitment of teachers had been problematic for some time resulting in a high proportion of temporary or supply teachers in the predecessor school but this has now changed and, in the last year, applications are more buoyant and staff changes have stabilised.

Achievement and standards

Students enter Barnfield South with standards that are below national averages, especially in mathematics and literacy skills, but also low in many other subjects. Many had failed to make progress previously in the predecessor school, which had achievement levels that were in the lowest 1% of all schools nationally for the three years prior to closure. As a consequence, Barnfield South inherited a legacy of under achievement and low standards. The major impact of this was problematic levels of basic literacy that undermined improvements in many other subjects. Improving literacy in all subjects is thus a major priority

The proportion of students in Year 11 achieving the headline figure of 5 A*- C grades at GCSE in 2007 was 19% with only 17% doing so when including mathematics and English. In 2008 the proportion achieving 5 A*- C grades including

English and mathematics was doubled to 36% with 45% managing 5 GCSE grades in any subjects. Historically the proportion of students who had achieved no passes of any kind had been almost three times the national average at around 6%. This has also improved considerably and in 2008 virtually every student managed to obtain at least one pass. In 2008 the academy was recognised as one of the most improved schools in England and there are compelling reasons to expect this significant progress to be continued in 2009.

Overall student progress has improved from well below to significantly above national averages in mathematics and English. Despite this, achievement overall remains just below expected levels. This is largely due to the poor performance of some departments, including humanities and some sciences but also reflects the priority the academy has put on improving basic numeracy and literacy skills. In this regard it has been successful. Although progress has improved from well below to significantly above national averages in mathematics and English there remain some inconsistencies in the performance of some groups. Boys make slightly less progress than girls for example and Pakistani heritage students and those of white British heritage make less progress compared to all students, especially within Key Stage 3. Students who are entitled to free school meals also underachieve. This means that some students are at greater risk of low achievement than many others. The academy has responded to this by introducing additional support where appropriate via individual tutoring. Students who receive additional support now achieve well compared to their peers.

This paints a picture of considerable improvement from a low base. Although standards are now close to the national average, progress is improving considerably for students across the ability range. The proportion of students who achieve the highest A*-A grades has improved to 7%. A particular feature of this improvement is that it is being secured across all ability groups although the academy acknowledges that improving attainment and the relative progress of boys is a priority for the future. In the last year however the academy has implemented a robust student assessment and tracking system. This rests on monitoring student progress towards minimum expected grades and where it shows students are slipping it triggers mentoring or additional support. For students in Years 10 and 11 this results in fortnightly checking. It is the accuracy and frequency of this system that leads to confidence in future predicted grades. As a result the academy confidently expects almost half of all students to achieve 5 A*-C grades at GCSE including English and mathematics in 2009. This would lift progress to significantly above national averages and represent outstanding progress. The minimum expected grade tracking system based on student progress is used to set challenging targets and the academy has already established a culture of achieving these. It expects student progress to be in the top 10% of all schools nationally by 2011.

Personal development and well-being

Attendance last year was around 92%, which is below the national average, but represents a marked improvement on previous years. Despite a range of strategies to make further improvements, current data shows that so far this year attendance has fallen to 90%. The inconsistent improvement to attendance levels has been analysed by the academy and persistent absences in some year groups are now being targeted in order to improve levels of attendance again.

The rate of exclusions increased significantly in 2007 to unacceptable levels. This was mainly due to measures to establish clear rules and fresh expectations of students and reflected a clear policy. However in 2008, exclusions have fallen dramatically and a majority of students have been reintegrated. Students are much more aware of how they are expected to behave and have responded positively to a new system of rewards for good behaviour and attitudes. This system is innovative and respected by students. It is similar to an 'air miles' credit card scheme in which students who attend well, behave well and engage in their learning are rewarded. The prizes available are highly sought after by the students who recognise and appreciate the thinking behind the scheme.

Behaviour, often unsatisfactory in the past is now satisfactory overall. Students show consideration to each other and visitors. Inspectors found it to be satisfactory or better in most lessons observed and only where teaching failed to capture students' interest did the quality of behaviour decline. When teaching is good behaviour is also. In one outstanding mathematics lesson students showed considerable enthusiasm and as a consequence their behaviour set a standard for others. Outside of lessons, particularly during movement between buildings behaviour is occasionally boisterous but generally satisfactory. Off task behaviour is challenged and recorded systematically; students are clear about the escalation of sanctions. The same 'ladder of sanctions' apply to lateness and as a result punctuality, a problem for many years in the predecessor school, has also improved considerably. The majority of students display positive attitudes in lessons. Most now arrive punctually, listen attentively and behave themselves. They are eager to learn and willing to contribute but a small minority choose not to respond and leave it to others to answer. This is not yet challenged enough by teachers in all subjects.

During discussions with inspectors, students listed improved behaviour, alongside less use of temporary teaching staff, as one of the most noticeable improvements. They felt safe, said bullying had reduced and that when it occurred they knew who to talk to. Students also said that there was no tension between the various ethnic groups but that more widespread integration was desirable, mainly outside of lessons. Although students said that they felt safer because bullying had reduced, they did express concern about the risk from strangers as some aspects of site security could still be improved despite the introduction of CCTV.

The majority of students receive at least 2 hours of physical education each week although a small minority in Key Stage 4 do not because they follow off-site vocational learning. Students said that after-school, 'there is loads to do', and the majority take part in some after-school or weekend enrichment. A deeper extended offer is planned for all students but there are some examples, now welcomed and supported, that are helping to improve attainment. This includes the Saturday classes and the innovative astronomy sessions alongside optional aspects such as early entry to A level mathematics for high attaining students. Food on offer has improved considerably but some less than healthy food is still for sale at breaks and lunchtimes.

The academy council ensures that the student voice is heard and listened to. There are regular surveys of student opinion, which show clearly the growing pride they now feel in the academy. They also feel that they have an important role to play in the future development of the academy. For example, informing the rewards system and modelling vertical tutoring by older students of younger ones. They feel that the biggest changes have been in improved attitudes, behaviour, respect for teachers, the rewards system, higher expectations, a wider choice of courses and qualifications and above all, permanent teachers. This is an impressive list of improvements. Students would like to see further improvement to the toilets, community involvement, access to all staircases, more technology to accept their Vivo cards alongside longer lunchtimes. Some students who remember the predecessor school are able to compare and speak eloquently about their perception of their current education. One student in particular captured this hugely improved ethos with the words that 'the academy just doesn't give up on you'. This comment reflected their views that 'staff care' about their performance and this has gained their respect.

Students make a growing contribution to the local community, through the schools' specialism in performing arts but also in a range of other initiatives such as care for elderly residents. Students feel that stronger links with the community are being forged through greater involvement with primary feeder students and regular information via the newsletter. The academy, however, recognises that although there is an enhanced engagement with the community it has yet more to do in this regard.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching has improved considerably in the last year. The academy's current monitoring shows that over 90% of lessons observed are consistently satisfactory or better, and that the percentage of good or outstanding lessons is improving rapidly. Observations by inspectors confirmed the schools views. The majority of lessons seen were satisfactory or better and although there remain occasional inadequate sessions, an increasing proportion of outstanding lessons serve to illustrate the progress made in improving the quality of teaching and

learning and developing good practice. A thoughtful programme of sharing this expertise more widely across the academy to further enhance the quality of teaching is underway. This benefits particularly from practical support and close collaboration with the academy's sponsor, Barnfield College.

This improvement has been achieved through regular staff training and development coupled with a rigorous programme of monitoring involving lesson observations of all teachers. Rigorous procedures are in place to monitor the effectiveness of all aspects of their work and all teachers and middle leaders are held fully accountable for what is achieved in their subjects and areas of responsibility. Senior managers have identified a group of teachers who demonstrate the best practice and are using them to support others. They have also identified those teachers that need further support to improve the quality of learning in their lessons in order to continue to increase the proportion of lessons moving from being satisfactory to good. In outstanding lessons observed there was a high level of questioning of students that required extended vocabulary in responses which encouraged the students to think more deeply.

Particular strengths include high expectations by teachers, strong subject knowledge and an enthusiasm for the subject, effective organisation and lesson planning and good classroom management. Where these features are evident teachers quickly establish positive relationships and student behaviour improved. Inspectors also observed good use of group work and new technologies helping to make learning fun and interesting. This included the use of song and dance across subjects. The use of technology to make lessons more engaging is commonplace but it is not always used as interactively as it could be. When it is used to show, for example, video clips and animation the students responded well and progress became much more rapid. Teachers take frequent opportunities to encourage independent learning and are keen to improve behaviour in a positive way through a good use of praise.

There remain occasional examples of low expectations about presentation, especially in written work, some variation in marking and limited note-making during discussion. The linking of lesson content to syllabus and exam questions is emerging as a key to improvement but it is not yet consistently done. Similarly, checking the progress of individual learners at stages during lessons is also evident in some but not all lessons. In the best lessons teachers took the opportunity to correct and improve student's literacy skills, both spoken and written, irrespective of the subject being taught. This is not yet evident in all lessons however and given the legacy of low levels of literacy this remains a key priority for the academy.

A key feature of improvement is the securing of a bold and innovative curriculum, currently under development, but based on ensuring at an early stage students have the necessary basic skills and competencies needed to learn effectively and then later on meeting the individual needs and aspirations of students. This curriculum is also encouraging a greater emphasis on enterprise and economic well being. It is being developed in partnership with the College to widen student choice at all ages but particularly between the ages of 14 and 16.

A good foundation programme in Year 7 has been extended into Year 8. At the end of Year 8 all students select three GCSE or BTEC courses to study over two or three years. This is quite new and has not yet been fully tested to gauge its effectiveness, but early signs show that students are responding positively to the wider choice and added challenge it provides for them. The college sponsor supports this development by offering a post 16 guarantee of provision to those students who wish it.

Students select from a wide range of entry level, GCSE and increasing range of BTEC awards. Students value this breadth of choice. Flexibility allows students less suited to GCSE studies to access vocational learning off site. A good quality enrichment programme is valued by students and increasingly allows many of them to study for additional GCSE awards in their own time after school and at weekends.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the academy contribute to outstanding progress through a very successful mix of talents allied to crisp and rigorous analysis of strengths and weaknesses. This rigour is underpinned by the thoughtful integrity of decision making at the most senior level. The successful partnership with Barnfield College is a particular feature with evidence of genuine collaboration at a practical level (the principal of the college helped teach on weekends to establish additional mathematics classes for example) alongside some visionary approaches to curriculum development and regeneration and high strategic challenge. This has helped secure rapidly improving opportunities for students locally, a fact which the students themselves recognise.

The academy's principal shows a profound depth of integrity in decision-making processes and in long term planning. He has the confidence and the respect of the academy community and is popular amongst students who particularly appreciate that he greets them almost daily. Plans are thought out well, ambitious and illustrate a commitment to long-term sustainable growth. The academy does not adopt a quick fix approach to improvement, especially in curriculum innovation, and yet has managed genuine success in a short period. As a consequence aspirations are rising throughout the academy both for students and staff. It is transformational.

However, this constructive and developmental approach is backed by clarity of action, rigorous analysis and high challenge. Departmental reviews (MOVER reviews), carried out earlier in the year are honest, detailed and frank. They are used to set high expectations of staff and closely linked to student achievement and standards. The senior leadership team have implemented a series of systems to ensure that accurate tracking of student achievement is a core focus. The work of the associate principal has been key in establishing the ethos and validity of this system. This team have recently restructured the management team throughout the academy in response to internal reviews and, although there remain some changes yet to come, this reorganisation has been effectively implemented. There are some

inconsistencies in the quality of leadership at subject level which shows in the departmental reviews and is reflected in some subjects underperforming, such as humanities. There are also examples of internal monitoring in which some departments evaluate their own lessons with a focus on teaching skills rather than learning. The effect of this is to dilute the emphasis on student progress found in most departments. Decisive action has either been taken or is planned to improve this. This level of accurate self evaluation and strong leadership indicates a high capacity to improve further.

The Chair of the Board of Directors, as principal of the sponsor college, is a strong ambassador for the academy, striking a balance between a 'hands on' involvement with frequent contact with a strategic vision and challenge. This energy and drive, together with the vision and attention to detail provided by the principal and associate principal is the driving force behind the academy's strong progress so far. The board of directors use their expertise to provide direction alongside practical involvement such as enhancing the vocational links with businesses locally. Financial monitoring systems are secure and forward thinking.

External support

The academy is part of a strong federation and benefits from a close partnership between Barnfield College and the sister academy, Barnfield West. This partnership is exemplified by the sharing of resources and expertise in addition to the developing of a shared strategic vision for the local area. The support from the college in particular in developing, for example, a vocational strand to the curriculum and by the offer of a post 16 place for those students who may benefit from it has contributed well to the success so far. The accurate guidance from the school improvement partner has helped secure the correct priorities for the academy and has contributed to the current progress.

Main Judgements

The academy has made outstanding progress towards raising standards with good progress in improving teaching.

Priorities for further improvement

- Secure a greater focus on improving core literacy skills in all subjects
- Ensure that the quality of management at all levels mirrors that at the top by increasing the focus in lesson evaluations on learning and by improved departmental planning
- Develop a consistency of monitoring across departments by modelling the best practice

- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding teaching yet further
- Monitor the impact of the curriculum changes on standards – especially in relation to the vocational element.

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

Yours sincerely

Ceri Morgan
Her Majesty's Inspector