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Mrs Rachel de Souza
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs de Souza

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Barnfield West Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Elaine Taylor HMI to your academy on 24 and 25 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, visited 24 part lessons, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, senior and middle leaders, groups of staff, the sponsor/chair of the academy board, and the external consultant supporting the development of community cohesion. Inspectors met formally with groups of pupils and informally during lessons and during break times. A telephone conversation was held with the School Improvement Partner.

Context

Barnfield West Academy opened in September 2007, for pupils aged 11 - 16 years of age in the premises of the predecessor school. It is sponsored by the further education college, Barnfield College, and is part of a federated structure with Barnfield South Academy and Barnfield College. It is also part of Campus Luton, the partnership for the strategic planning and delivery of the 14 – 19 curriculum. Work on the new building is due to start in June 2009. This building includes facilities for a sixth form, due to open in September 2011.

The academy is slightly smaller than most secondary schools. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is over twice the national average, and increasing. The proportion from minority ethnic backgrounds is much higher than the national average, and is also increasing. The number of students with English as an additional language is above average, although only a few are at the early stages of learning English. An above average number of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, mainly related to literacy, behavioural, emotional social difficulties. There are fewer students than average with a statement of special educational need. The number of students admitted has risen substantially into the Academy's second year and it has had to cap admissions into the upper school.

In 2008, the Academy achieved the International Schools Status Award and the Bronze level Eco-Award. The academy has also received nine national awards by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust for 'Raising Achievement and Transforming Learning', including most improved academy; most improved school or academy 2007 – 2008 and most improved school or academy east region.

All students on roll at the predecessor school, and all staff employed at the school transferred to the academy. Although initially the academy experienced some difficulty in recruiting suitably qualified staff, there is now a good response to any posts advertised.

Achievement and standards

When the academy opened in September 2007, the prior attainment of Year 11 students in their tests at the end of Key Stage 3 was exceptionally low, although their prior attainment when joining the predecessor school in Year 7 had been just below average. In 2008, the standards reached by these students had improved so much that they were overall in line with national averages. This outstanding progress within less than a year is remarkable and resulted in the academy winning such an impressive number of awards from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Current students in Years 10 and 11 are on track to reach highly aspirational targets, and to make outstanding progress.

The academy is still awaiting the final results of the 2008 Key Stage 3 tests, but acknowledges that standards at Key Stage 3 did not improve significantly, as the key priority had been to raise standards and improve the economic well-being of the Year 10 and Year 11 students. However current standards in Key Stage 3 are rising and evidence from lessons shows that they are making good progress towards aspirational targets. There is no clear evidence of variations between different groups of students.

Personal development and well-being

Students are well mannered and respectful and enjoy the relaxed but civilised atmosphere in the dining hall. Students have a well-developed sense of right and

wrong for example in their responses in a discussion about the holocaust and in their ability to work cooperatively in pairs or in groups in lessons. Behaviour is good around the academy and in lessons. Exclusions have fallen dramatically as have incidents of disruption in lessons. Pupils say they feel safe, because staff are increasingly vigilant. Bullying is dealt with and although students told the inspectors that there are still occasional instances where it occurs, they are confident that it will be dealt with. The anti-bullying action team, which is run by prefects and uses peer mentors to support the victims of incidents, is proving successful in encouraging students to seek help if needed. Attendance is good, but the academy continues to work very effectively to further improve both attendance and punctuality.

Students make an outstanding contribution to the community both within the academy and across the community, for example through the student council and by working in local primary schools. The students' awareness of how to stay healthy is satisfactory. As yet, students have fewer opportunities to reflect and develop spiritually.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is now good, with some outstanding teaching and a reducing ratio of satisfactory teaching. In the vast majority of lessons teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge because largely they are teaching in their specialist areas. Relationships are positive and respectful, to quote one student, 'teachers respect us, so we respect them'.

In the best lessons, teachers have high expectations of students, expecting high quality work. They engage students in their learning through stimulating activities using electronic whiteboards very effectively to promote learning. Teachers' use of questioning is skilled and challenging. Teacher use their knowledge of their subject and of their students effectively to frame open-ended questions to develop understanding. The best examples are where all students are actively involved in reflecting on the answers. This very effective teaching also ensures that students are aware of the grade or level criteria for their learning outcomes, so that they know what they have to do to move to achieve the next level within the lesson.

The common lesson format is a positive feature, although not all teachers are using this consistently and there is some variation in the quality of lesson design. Although most lessons are pitched appropriately, where teaching is less challenging, it does not always match learning sufficiently or expectations of students work are not always high enough.

The curriculum follows a traditional model and is broad and balanced, with a good mix of academic and vocational subjects on offer at Key Stage 4. A strong feature is the quality and range of intervention work that so effectively raised attainment in GCSE and other examinations at the end of Year 11. Provision for those in danger of

disengagement is made through the innovative and highly effective Studio School, run in partnership with Barnfield College. This initiative also supports students who are gifted and/or talented through a focus on enterprise.

The academy's response to local needs has been a key feature evidenced by the well-developed plans for further improvements and refinements for 2009 to 2010 as the academy develops. The impact of the ICT specialism is a strong feature across the academy and is seen in the use of electronic whiteboards by teachers and the high levels of attainment in the subject at both key stages.

Cross curricular projects are starting to be developed and these are proving effective in motivating students, for example between geography and English and between English and mathematics. Literacy and numeracy are supported across the curriculum, but this is variable in quality. The academy is aware that provision for the students' personal, social, health and citizenship education is less strong and has plans to address this issue.

Arrangements to ensure that adults employed by the school and volunteers are suitable to work with young people are robust, up-to-date and fully meet current regulations. Health and safety procedures are rigorous, risk assessments are thorough and child protection guidance is fully implemented. Staff have the necessary training to assure students' well-being. Most students feel their personal needs are addressed effectively. The academy's inclusion provision is outstanding, giving those students who are sometimes reluctant learners, those who have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those with English as an additional language positive support in their learning, and increasing their self-esteem and confidence.

Systems to improve behaviour and reduce exclusion, promote attendance and reduce lateness are rigorous and have led to a reduction in absence, lateness, bullying, and in the frequency of incidents. The reward system which includes the innovative use of the games room is an integral part of these systems.

Academic guidance is variable. Leaders are aware that the system for tracking progress in Key Stage 3 is not as effective as that used in Key Stage 4 and plans are in place to further develop the system used in Key Stage 3. Where practice is effective, students receive very good guidance on how to improve their work, but there are inconsistencies in the use of marking and feedback and in the use of targets for improvement.

Leadership and management

The dramatic rise in standards in 2008 was the result of the high aspiration and outstanding leadership provided by senior team and by the academy board. The sponsor initially and subsequently the principal and senior leaders were passionate and unshaken in their belief that they could raise standards and improve the quality

of provision for students in the local area. The academy opened with a very strong focus on culture and ethos, with careful attention paid to creating a calm, attractive environment to support learning and to setting a standard for students and staff. Part of this culture is a strong emphasis on celebrating success, for both students and staff. The attention paid to creating this culture has resulted in a strong dedicated staff team with students who recognise that they now have the chance to succeed. The principal knows that the academy's success has been a team effort and that 'everybody - staff, students, parents and carers and directors –worked tirelessly towards the goal'. However, leaders are aware of the challenge to sustain levels of progress in the long term, and are relentless in their intent to give the students the best possible education.

Leaders have outstanding strategic vision. Self evaluation procedures are comprehensive and rigorous. Action planning at all levels is tightly focused, detailed and carefully staged to develop the effectiveness of all aspects of provision. The academy has set challenging targets to raise standards both within the academy and in the local area. The key priority for sustaining improvement has been and is further developing the quality of teaching and learning. Continuous professional development is integral to the development of this process. Training is creative in its approach and is phased to enable continued improvement. Senior leaders are rightly developing the strength of middle leadership, again, through training, and by holding them to account for evaluating provision and enabling progress within their departments. Community cohesion is developing into an outstanding feature. Internal cohesion is improving and is good. Cohesion with the local and international communities are outstanding features. The academy has worked very effectively with the parent focus group, involving them in all academy developments and key decisions.

The academy's track record of improvement since opening and the accuracy of its self-evaluation processes demonstrate that it has outstanding capacity for improvement.

External support

The academy has drawn effectively and strategically of a wide range of external support and has benefited from a range of other partners including local primary schools and business partners. Barnfield College provides outstanding support, with their '100% course offer pledge' post-16, curriculum support, including the studio school and vocational centres, and support in terms of ICT, financial management and the economies of scale provided by joint purchasing and joint commissioning. The school improvement partner is a trusted partner whose advice has had high impact. Other partners who have had a high level of impact are the external consultant Ormiston education and local external services.

Main Judgement

The academy has made outstanding progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further improving the quality of teaching and learning so that:
 - activities in lessons are tailored to meet the needs of all students
 - students know how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve their work
- Develop students' learning skills, so that they all become independent reflective learners

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

Yours sincerely

Heather Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector