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Mr John Toland
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Dear Mr Toland

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Oasis Academy Mayfield

Introduction

Following my visit with Joanna Beckford-Hall HMI and Sheelagh Barnes Additional Inspector to your academy on 6 and 7 October 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work including 24 parts of lessons. A range of documentation was scrutinised and meetings were held with the Principal, other leaders, groups of students and governors. A discussion with the academy's education adviser from the Department of Children, Schools and Families was conducted on the telephone.

Context

Oasis Academy Mayfield is an 11-16, mixed secondary school with 879 students on roll. Specialism in global communications is at an early stage of development. Most students are from White British backgrounds and very few speak English as an additional language. There are far more boys than girls. The number of students eligible for free school meals is broadly average. An above average number of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

There was considerable resistance to the closure of the two predecessor schools, Woolston School Language College and Grove Park Business and Enterprise College

When the academy opened in September 2008 feelings amongst students, parents and the wider community were still running high. One of the closing schools was a boys' school and the other was mixed. Each school had a distinct but very different ethos. The academy faced significant challenges in integrating the two communities.

The academy is currently operating on two sites with Key Stage 3 students based on one site and Key Stage 4 students on the other. The Principal is involved in the design of new buildings which will allow the school to come together on the Key Stage 3 site in 2012. The sponsors, Oasis Community Learning, have a team that will be dedicated to the successful completion of the building project so that senior leaders can retain their focus on raising standards.

The academy opened with a high number of temporary staff but this situation has now been stabilised. There is a full complement of teaching staff most of whom are permanent. About half of current staff transferred from the predecessor schools. The Principal took up his post in November 2008 following the resignation of the first Principal of the academy.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

The academy has worked well to create a more positive climate for learning. The consequent improvement in students' attitudes to learning is contributing to rising achievement. Students are responding to higher expectations. Their aspirations are rising and they are developing a sense of belonging. Standards on entry to the academy are broadly average. In 2009, 41% of students achieved five higher grade GCSEs and 35% included English and mathematics in the five. These results were secured against a backdrop of very challenging circumstances. Whilst standards remain well below average, students are now making better progress in lessons and are on track to achieve results that will narrow the gap with national averages.

The academy has introduced good systems for tracking the progress of students and has a clear picture of achievement across the school. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, those for whom English is an additional language and students eligible for free school meals achieve as well as other students. The academy is aware of the underperformance of some boys. Appropriate interventions are being systematically implemented to tackle this. There is variation in students' performance both within and across subjects reflecting inconsistencies in teaching and learning and the use of assessment information. However, teachers are developing their expertise in evaluating students' progress in relation to national curriculum levels and there is good practice to share. Older students are generally aware of what level they are working at, younger students are not so clear; overall, too many do not know what they have to do to improve their work.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students in Key Stage 4 report that life at the academy has 'really improved' over the last year; they feel safe and well guided. Students in Key Stage 3 are positive about the academy but not so emphatic. The different groups of students who talked with inspectors were confident they would be listened to and taken seriously if they raised any issues or encountered problems. Students feel that opportunities to influence decision making within the academy are growing and, increasingly, they take on responsibilities through the student council.

Although greatly improved, standards of behaviour are variable, particularly on the Key Stage 3 site where the atmosphere is not as settled and orderly as it is on the Key Stage 4 site. The academy is establishing good procedures for monitoring attendance and there are signs that it is improving but a trend of satisfactory attendance over time is yet to be secured.

Safeguarding procedures are robust. Policy and practice are monitored regularly and staff have received appropriate training. The academy has made appropriate checks on all adults who work with the students and ensures its single central record of such checks is updated at the recommended intervals.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching and learning are improving with a higher proportion that is satisfactory or better. Good practice is being shared, with more work to do in ironing out inconsistencies. Where teaching and learning are most effective the following features are evident:

- learning objectives derive from a clear understanding of individual students' prior attainment, are closely matched to students' needs and used as a benchmark to check progress
- warm relationships that support and promote learning
- high expectations for behaviour secured through skilful and consistent implementation of the behaviour management system
- teachers have good subject knowledge
- questioning requires students to develop their thinking skills and extend their verbal responses
- a good variety of activities sequences learning and enables students to secure learning objectives
- cross-curricular links are made and key literacy, numeracy and ICT skills are developed
- assessment is used well to fill gaps in students' understanding and clarify the next learning steps
- a lively pace that is sensitive to the response of students
- good opportunities for peer and self-assessment
- teachers model successful learning and use exemplar material skilfully.

The key areas of inconsistency are related to:

- the clarity, appropriateness and tailoring of learning objectives
- the quality of assessment and marking
- the use of behaviour management systems to demonstrate that positive, co-operative behaviour is fundamental to successful learning.

Senior leaders have carefully reviewed the curriculum to improve the delivery of core subjects and ensure that students receive well-targeted additional support where necessary. Programmes of work to develop core competencies are built into the Key Stage 3 curriculum with emphasis given to the improvement of literacy skills. There are clear and appropriate plans for extending vocational courses in Key Stage 4 and advancing the academy's specialism in global communications through modern foreign languages, media, humanities, art and technology subject options. The new personal, social and health education programme is helping students to mature into thoughtful individuals with a sense of their identity and responsibilities.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The Principal's passion and clarity of vision instils belief in a better future, giving confidence to both staff and students. His determination is driving improvement at a pace. Governors share his ambition. As new policies and procedures become established, their impact increases but there are still inconsistencies in implementation. The behaviour management policy is a good example of this. It emphasises learning as the priority and where it is applied with confidence and skill it is effective. However, there are still too many lessons where disruption interrupts learning and slows progress.

Senior leaders have a clear view of the academy's strengths and areas for development. They are working together as an effective and cohesive team. A cycle of rigorous evaluation of the academy's work is becoming established and making staff accountable for students' attainment. Middle leaders are involved in these processes but there is more to do in some cases to build leaders' capacity to assure the quality of the work of their teams and drive improvement themselves. Teamwork is strengthening across the academy. Staff are embracing change with the shared purpose of improving outcomes for students. Clear arrangements for line management are helping to raise standards of professionalism and develop shared values. Good opportunities for professional development link coherently with academy improvement plans and the individual needs of staff. Resources are being appropriately deployed to achieve satisfactory value for money.

Students' achievement and well-being are central to improvement planning. The academy has travelled a substantial distance from its challenging starting point. The examination results of 2009 represent recovery from a low point where outcomes for students were threatened by the turbulence resulting from the closure of the predecessor schools. The strong foundations now being laid demonstrate good capacity for future improvement.

External support

The academy has worked in close and valued partnership with the sponsors. Effective consultancy has been instrumental in addressing weaknesses in teaching and learning. Partnership with another academy has also been helpful in strengthening management systems, for example, the collection and analysis of performance data.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Embed assessment practices in teaching and learning so that all teachers:
 - use assessment information to match learning opportunities to students' needs
 - evaluate students' progress in lessons and give them clear feedback about their next learning steps
 - help students develop the skills of self-assessment through regular opportunities to evaluate their work in lessons.

- Share best practice in teaching and learning particularly:
 - lesson planning
 - maintaining pace
 - using plenaries to evaluate and reinforce learning
 - methods to increase students' participation and engagement.

- Continue to improve the climate for learning, especially in Key Stage 3 by:
 - implementing behaviour management systems consistently
 - linking positive behaviour and successful learning

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the academy council and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline White
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of the academy council
the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk]