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12 November 2009

Mr Ian Golding
Principal
Oasis Academy: Lord's Hill
Lower School - Green Lane
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Southampton
SO16 9RG

Dear Mr Golding

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Oasis Academy: Lord's Hill

Introduction

Following my visit with Margaret Dickinson HMI and Roger Garrett, Additional Inspector, to your academy on 10 and 11 November 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 a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal and other academy leaders and staff, groups of students, the vice chair of the academy council, and a representative of the sponsor. Inspectors also spoke informally with staff and students during the inspection.

Context

Oasis Academy: Lord's Hill, sponsored by Oasis Community Learning, opened in September 2008, following an accelerated merger and the closure of Millbrook Community School and Oaklands Community School. The academy is using the same buildings as its predecessor schools pending the development of new accommodation that is expected to be ready for September 2012. It provides education for students in Years 7 to 11 and it manages sessional day-care provision for children aged just under three years and three- to five-year-olds. It also offers a



range of extended services for the students, their parents and the local community. The academy has a specialism in visual and performing arts, combined with a developing focus on business and enterprise. It has received the Artsmark gold award. Its mission is to raise standards of achievement and engage the wider community through the promotion of effective innovative practice.

There are currently 793 students on roll and 22 children in its early years provision. The great majority of students are of White British heritage and the number whose first language is not English is low. About three in five students are boys, a proportion which is above average. Almost half of the students have been identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities and this is well above that found nationally. The majority has behavioural, emotional or social difficulties. Very few have a statement of special educational needs. Eleven students are looked after by the local authority. The academy serves a community with pockets of socio-economic deprivation, and the proportion of students entitled to free school meals is above average.

Staff transferred to the academy from its predecessor schools and, although there have been some changes in the past year, staffing has remained relatively stable. The academy has a full complement of teaching staff.

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

The impact of the academy's strategies and provision can be seen in the improving standards, even though they remain low. Data provided by the academy indicate that the standards achieved by students in Year 11 examinations in 2009 show an improvement when compared with what was predicted when they started. Substantial gains were made in some areas in 2009, for instance in the proportion of those achieving five higher GCSE grades. The impact of the academy's specialism is reflected in above average attainment in subjects such as media, art, drama and music. For instance, in music all of the students entered gained a C grade or higher in 2009 examinations. There were also some strong performances in subjects such as BTEC sport, and health and social care. However, variability exists and in some subject areas such as world studies and dance, outcomes were not as positive. Current available data indicates that standards are continuing to rise. This is reflected, for example, in English where coursework shows an increase in the proportion of students working at a C level. There is also an increase in the number of students with grade A standards in their work. Current data for Year 11 indicates that students are on track to continue this improving trend in respect of those achieving five or more GCSE A* to C grades, when English and mathematics are included.

The majority of students made at least satisfactory progress in the academy's first year. However, a significant minority of students, who had been disengaged from education before joining the academy, underperformed. Progress was also slower for

some students who had behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. On the other hand, some students, including those with other special educational needs and/or disabilities made good progress and in some instances made exceptional gains in their learning. Current data regarding students' progress indicates that there are no significant variations between groups.

Inspectors observed a variable picture of learning and progress in lessons across the academy and in the students' work. The over-riding picture, however, is one of improvement. This is exemplified in students' enjoyment, engagement and their attitudes to learning. It is also reflected in the students' own comments to inspectors. In some lessons, such as art and the 'rock school', students show a high degree of enthusiasm, independent learning and well developed evaluative skills. There are examples of some students with special educational needs and/or disabilities making good progress in their learning because of the quality of the teaching and additional support they receive. However, in some lessons students were not learning as effectively as they could because there was a lack of focus on their individual needs or they were passive for too long in the lesson.

Other pupil outcomes

Attendance is improving even though overall attendance rates remain low when compared with national averages. This overview masks some important differences between year groups. Attendance levels in Years 7 and 8 are better than in the other year groups, and data regarding lateness reflects a similar trend. The majority of students who are looked after by the local authority attend well. When the academy opened, it inherited a significant minority of students who had either not attended their previous schools at all or had entrenched patterns of poor attendance. The academy is being successful in turning this around. The proportion of persistent absentees is falling significantly, one student ascribing this to the fact that the academy helped him become a 'reformed character'. This success is directly linked to the quality of the academy's systems for analysing and tracking students' attendance and the tenacity with which staff follow up absence. It is also testament to students' engagement with and enjoyment of their learning, and the quality and personalised curriculum on offer. This can be summed up by a comment from one student who said of the academy, 'If I had a bed here I'd sleep here – I love it'.

The academy helps students develop their self-belief and confidence as learners and this is related to a pattern of improving behaviour which was commented on by students and staff alike. Inspectors saw both good and exemplary behaviour in lessons and during assembly. Behaviour was less positive in lessons where the teaching was not as stimulating or the students' needs were not being met. There were occasional instances where behaviour required a firmer response by staff. Improvements in behaviour have resulted in a marked reduction of exclusions this term and in the number of days lost to exclusion from the previously high rates. Students participate in and contribute very effectively to extra-curricular clubs and

the learning of others; for instance, a Year 11 student led a dance club in preparing a 'Back to the 80's' performance. A very small minority of students who left the academy in the summer are not in education, employment or training. Most students went on to further education.

The effectiveness of provision

Lessons vary in quality. The academy's own evaluation is that there are not yet enough consistently good lessons and inspectors agree. Lesson sessions are longer than those found in many schools. In better lessons, teachers have high expectations, make good use of the time and are effective in creating and maintaining a purposeful atmosphere of learning for all. They draw upon a wide range of strategies to engage and challenge students. Teachers' questioning and on-going links with assessment criteria throughout the lesson help students in their learning. Additional support staff are well deployed during the lesson and students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good and sometimes excellent progress. The enthusiasm and energy of the staff, with some innovative practice, in these lessons produces an equally strong response in the students, and some make exceptional strides in their learning. For example, in the 'rock school' students are provided with highly personalised and independent learning opportunities and enabled to hone their evaluative skills.

Teaching is not yet of this high standard across the academy. Lessons are sometimes slow to start and the pace drops towards the end, indicating a lack of urgency in making best use of the 100-minute lesson time. In some lessons, attention wanes because tasks continue for too long. Learning loses momentum for some students because there is not enough focus by the staff on individual learning needs. In these instances, staff miss opportunities to stretch a student who may have completed a task quickly, or spot one who is not making any progress. There is a lack of crisp clarity during these lessons about what students are expected to learn, as opposed to what they are expected to do. The quality of students' presentation and teachers' written feedback is inconsistent, including some instances where written feedback provides insufficient guidance to help students improve.

The academy has revamped the curriculum considerably and it is becoming embedded during this second year of operation. The focus on personalisation built around students' interests and needs is an emerging strength. Students appreciate the many improvements in the breadth of courses and extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities. The curriculum provides a secure foundation for students' progress and development. Its innovative structure includes a 'competency curriculum' in Years 7 and 8 aimed at helping students develop a range of competencies to thrive in their learning and personal development. There is a wide choice in Key Stage 4 which includes a balance of academic and more vocational courses, such as motor vehicle maintenance and BTEC animal care. The introduction of modular courses and early course entry is having a positive impact on students'

motivation and achievement. Students benefit from many opportunities, underpinned by the academy's specialism, to participate in creative, imaginative and productive work. Inspectors observed this at first-hand when attending the impressive youth theatre rehearsals for 'Stop the Traffik', a production highlighting the issues of people trafficking. This nugget of excellence is one example where the academy has built on identified strengths from its predecessor schools. The quality and impact of the academy's provision is recognised by the achievement of the Artsmark gold award. The academy's positive partnership with schools and colleges is exemplified in the fact that it is the hub for the Creative and Media Diploma within Southampton.

Pre-school provision reflects the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage. There is a satisfactory promotion of children's personal, social and emotional development. Adults observe children and keep satisfactory records of the small steps in their learning and development, and there is an appropriate attention to care. Planning covers all required areas for the Early Years Foundation Stage but it is not always sufficiently detailed to show how learning and development will be promoted for individual children.

The academy gives high priority to providing personalised care for students, and particularly those most at risk of being 'lost to education'. This is at the heart of its ethos. This work is spearheaded by dedicated staff in an effective personalised learning department. It supports students who are struggling with some aspect of academy life, currently about one in every six students. The range is from targeted literacy support in the lower school, to off-site provision and extended work experience for older students. The attendance and performance of students in off-site provision is monitored rigorously. The department holds rich information about students' progress and staff use this well to target interventions in a timely and increasingly effective way.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The academy opened after a relatively short preparation time and it faced some considerable challenges in its first year to bring together staff and approaches to education from two very different schools. The Principal has brought skilful leadership, clear vision and direction and, by working alongside an effective leadership team, has managed this change process well. The academy leadership team are pooling their complementary skills well and, together with developing strengths among learning zone coordinators, providing a secure foundation at the heart of the academy's journey of improvement. Inspectors saw evidence of collaborative working based on a shared vision and drive to secure improvements, particularly in the quality of teaching and learning and in raising standards. Leaders and managers ensure that strategic leadership and the day-to-day management are smooth and effective. The academy has an accurate understanding of what it has achieved and what further development is required in the short and longer term.

This is based on rigorous self-evaluation at all levels, underpinned by a wealth of performance and progress data. Resources are managed well. The visual and performing arts specialism is having a positive impact on raising student's attainment and, by also increasing their motivation, is a significant factor in the academy's development.

Staff are held to account for their performance and decisive action is taken when areas of weakness are identified. The academy has set challenging targets for staff and students, and while it does not underestimate the task of achieving these, there is a common determination and capacity to succeed. The combination of the pace of development and the measured and secure systems that are being put in place indicate that it has good capacity to sustain an improving trend. The academy continues to face some important challenges, for example in relation to its budget and managing two sites for the next few years.

Lines of accountability are secure and the Principal is accountable to the Oasis Community Learning executive and the board for the work and impact of the academy. The academy council provides the support and appropriate challenge to the academy as it reviews its impact on the students and the wider community. These twofold lines of accountability, together with regular reporting against key performance indicators, ensure that the monitoring and evaluation of its work is secure.

External support

The academy benefits greatly from the support and advice of the regional education director from Oasis Community Learning, who brings considerable educational experience with him. It also benefits from the advice and contribution of its School Improvement Partner. Regular contact between the principals from sister academies in the Oasis Community provides valued opportunities for the Principal to have professional dialogue and share good practice among fellow colleagues. This support mechanism is appreciated enormously. The academy is outward-looking and contributes to a range of partnerships locally. It also benefits from their support, for example in promoting inclusion, delivering extended services, and in the cluster work with schools which has contributed to the above average attendance of students in Year 7.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve students' attendance and punctuality in Years 9 to 11 so that an increasing proportion of students reach or exceed the academy's targets.

- Ensure that, in lessons, the staff have a clearer focus on the learning of individuals. Broaden the range of teaching strategies to provide variety and challenge for all students.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of 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

John Kennedy

Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of the academy council
the Academies Group, DCSF