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Principal
Jerry Collins
Pimlico Academy
Lupus Street
London
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Dear Mr Collins,

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Pimlico Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Adrian Lyons HMI to your academy on 2-3 December 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, groups of students, members of the senior leadership team, intervention tutors and teachers.

Context

Pimlico Academy was opened in September 2008, sponsored by Future. The principal joined the academy in September 2008. Almost all staff of the predecessor school transferred to the academy when it opened. Staffing is currently stable and morale is high.

Part of the new building works on the current site have been completed and the completion date for the whole site is currently planned for February 2011. The academy has subject specialisms in history and visual and performing arts and is the only history specialist institution in the country. Numbers of students accessing the specialist music provision has doubled in the last year.

The academy has 1298 students, with boys outnumbering girls. A sixth form with 201 students is part of a local authority collaborative with two other schools. Despite Pimlico Academy being located in an affluent area of London, students live in wards that are amongst the most socially deprived in the country. Historically, young people living within the academy's local area have been disadvantaged through low aspirations, and an absence of a sense of identity and belonging. This has disengaged many from education and attainment and into local street cultures. Although students enter the academy with low reading ages, attainment on entry as measured through Key Stage 2 tests, is broadly in line, or just below national averages. The proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals is twice the national average. Nearly one quarter of all students are of White British heritage and the number of students who are advanced bilingual learners, or at early stages of acquiring English as an additional language, is high. About 15% are from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, although numbers of students entering the academy after the start of the year is reducing. Nearly 70 languages are spoken by staff and students in the academy. One third of students have moderate learning difficulties, dyslexia, behavioural, emotional and social needs and/or disabilities. This proportion is above the national average, as is the number of students with a statement to meet their special educational needs.

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

The academy has made good progress in raising students' achievement and standards in the last year. The strength of the Academy lies in its rigorous focus on improving achievement and progress of individual students through a well-structured and effective programme of raising aspirations, motivational learning and tutoring interventions. The majority of students in all years display mature and reflective attitudes to learning and are keen to achieve well. Most enjoy their learning and benefit from the challenge and support of paired and group work in those lessons, where this is planned.

From 2008 to 2009, the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades increased from 55% to 68%. The proportion of students attaining five or more A* to C GCSE grades, including English and mathematics, over a similar period has increased from 36% to 42%. However, this key indicator remains below the national average. Whilst the Academy has surpassed its target for 5 A* to C GCSEs, it has not yet met its target for 5 A* to C including English and Maths. Based on current data predictions, the present Year 11 students who have low prior attainment are likely to attain GCSE results that are well within national averages.

The GCSE results of 2009 indicated that White British boys performed less well than their peers, while girls of Pakistani heritage attained exceptionally better. Direct observation in lessons, by inspectors found that Pakistani girls continue to make good progress, whilst White British boys do not engage in their learning as well. Current data indicate that the sharp focus that academy leaders have on the

attainment of boys and girls, is successfully reducing the gap in progress and attainment between these groups. In Key Stage 3, the 2009 national tests results were in line with the national average for level 5 in English and mathematics, but below average for science. The proportions of students gaining level 6 were well below average in English, mathematics and science. The school's monitoring data predicts that the current Year 9 students will exceed last summer's national average for English at levels 5 and 6, mathematics at levels 5 and 6 and science at level 5, indicating good progress by students. In Key Stages 3 and 4, students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress as evidenced through their attainment.

Attainment in 2009 for students in the sixth form is broadly average. The national commercial value added tool used by the academy demonstrates that students achieve well in most subjects. Academic tracking and monitoring of students' progress is well established and the climate for learning has been greatly improved in the sixth form.

The academy has not yet met its aspirational attainment targets in all the specialist subjects, although the picture is a very positive one with significantly higher numbers of students successfully attaining outcomes in art, drama and music in 2009.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students' behaviour is good and even exemplary in some respects. Senior managers have instilled a strong ethos and culture of high aspirations. This is shared through profiling a set of values that stress mutual respect and commitment to learning and achieving. Students are inspired through a number of awards that recognise academic achievement and the achievements of those students who overcome personal barriers to attend the academy regularly and punctually. The impact of this is seen through a sharp increase in student attendance to above national averages. A new behaviour strategy, including the contribution of a psychotherapy service that targets and supports vulnerable students, has ensured a significant decrease in fixed term exclusions with no permanent exclusions this year. Low literacy levels present a considerable barrier to learning for many students. An intensive literacy intervention programme and two nurture 'Bridge Groups' have accelerated reading skills by eighteen months for those students attending. House assemblies have a strong focus on team building and developing a corporate identity. Pastoral leaders promote links with local charities through innovative fund raising activities, including a Pimlico Academy recipes book. In addition, extra-curricular activities, including good links with London theatres and art institutions, help to raise academic and career aspirations. Aspirations have been strengthened further through a wide range of rewards, speakers and trips that serve to broaden students' horizons and create higher self esteem. The new uniform and the new restaurant have also added to

students' sense of pride in the academy. Extra incentives provided by the academy to encourage good punctuality, attendance and healthy eating, include the popular free breakfasts for both students and staff. Refurbishments to the main block, including some comfortable seating, have resulted in a much more welcoming and receptive environment for students and visitors. Students reported feeling empowered to aspire to higher standards and they are proud of their academy.

The effectiveness of provision

The academy has made good progress in increasing the proportion of good teaching and learning. In the most effective lessons, the pace and challenge of learning tasks and activities match students' abilities. Good use is made of interactive white boards by teachers and students to check learning. Relationships between students and teachers create positive and mutually respectful learning environments that lead to good progress. Teachers have very sound subject knowledge and prepare resources that bring learning alive for students. The majority of teachers have excellent data on students' prior attainment and lesson plans, include detailed learning strategies for each student based on these data. However, this valuable information is not used consistently in implementing the activities and tasks in lessons. Where assessment processes successfully underpin the planning of learning, students' learning is checked by teachers through targeted questioning and formative assessment tasks. Where teaching and assessment are less effective, a minority of students lack challenge or struggle to understand basic concepts critical to underpinning knowledge. Some may not develop the appropriate skills they need, including writing skills. Teachers do not consistently check students' knowledge and skills before moving onto the next activity or learning point. Marking of students' work is inconsistent across subjects; in a few cases, it lacks informative detail and is perfunctory, although, there are good examples of detailed marking that would help a student make progress. In most cases, teachers do not ensure that students have revised, redrafted or corrected their work before moving on to the next stage of learning.

Teaching assistants working with students with behavioural or learning difficulties and those at early stages of English in lessons are not consistently helping students to optimise their learning. Those assistants observed in lessons by inspectors had not structured activities, including, for instance, making use of writing frames or other such helpful resources, to guide students as independent learners.

The academy has developed an effective personalised intervention programme for underachieving students that is having a sound impact on accelerating their progress. Students meet with tutors on a one-to-one basis and in small groups during the day, after school and at weekends. More and more students are attending these sessions, as they become more aware of the sessions' practical value in helping them achieve better results.

A vertical tutoring system resulting from the recent review of pastoral care is having a strong impact in increasing students' confidence and general achievement and contributes effectively to developing students' personal and social education. Peer and tutor mentoring activities for more vulnerable students take place during tutorials and students are given a much valued slot during the school day for reflection and personal reading. Sixth form students are very well integrated in this tutoring system and play an effective role in leading discussions with younger students on current affairs and topics of interest, thus encouraging citizenship skills.

A good range of GCE A level and BTEC courses at level 3 and vocational-related courses at level 2 meet the different needs and interests of most students. Recently, there has been increased emphasis on guiding Year 11 students to select the most appropriate post-16 courses.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Outstanding qualities within leadership and management combined with the excellent leadership of the principal and senior managers have very successfully driven forward improvements in the academy in the last year. A range of successful initiatives, carefully prioritised, have created a positive ethos of achievement and inclusion in the academy.

The high profile of senior managers within the academy buildings has led to significant improvements in staff and student morale. For instance, the meeting and greeting of staff and students by managers at the start of the school day demonstrates positive role models within a work context. Senior managers have dealt very successfully with staff absence across the academy and this has reduced by over a half this year.

Senior managers have focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning through effective monitoring of pace and challenge in lessons. Internal observations contribute towards a rigorous performance management system. The academy's overall evaluations of the effectiveness of teaching and learning are slightly more generous than that found by inspectors, owing to the focus of the internal observations on teaching, rather than students' learning, progress and assessment. Teachers receive helpful feedback about their lessons, but there is room for this to be more detailed and to take more account of the impact of teaching and assessment on the progress students make. Managers are now rightly intent on improving students' learning and progress in lessons. Middle managers are inducted by senior managers into more robust self-evaluation of the provision they manage. They have recently written helpful action plans for teaching specific areas of syllabus as part of their development plans. Leaders and managers know well the sixth form's strengths and areas of relative weakness and are acting effectively on these.

Effective steps have been taken to improve Pimlico Academy's relationships with parents and the local community. The academy has developed an outward facing ethos that includes a range of successful community activities delivered by external agencies. This along with the reputation of improving results, increase in staff and student attendance, and good student behaviour in and out of the academy buildings has increased its popularity with local communities and it is now oversubscribed as the first choice for Year 7 entrants. Leaders and managers have clearly demonstrated an outstanding capacity for sustaining improvements.

External support

The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has supported the academy in improving teaching and learning through coaching, training and developing self-evaluation skills. The academy's improvement partner has produced reports that are helpful in outlining areas that need addressing. The academy's sponsor, through links with business firms, has provided excellent support, mentoring opportunities and student internships. In addition, the sponsor has invested in the excellent in-house Raising Aspirations Programme and this has had a significant impact on the academy's ethos.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop a more rigorous approach by teachers and teaching assistants in using prior attainment to plan lessons that meet the needs of all students
- Enable greater consistency in marking and checking of students' learning in lessons
- Ensure a more effective focus on students' learning and progress in lessons by managers during internal quality assurance processes
- Analyse more rigorously trends in achievement and progress of students from minority ethnic groups so that these better inform learning strategies as part of lesson planning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State [*same person at Academies Group as in cc. list below*], the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Meena Wood
Her Majesty's Inspector