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Ms Janet Simpson
Acting Principal
West Lakes Academy
Main Street
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Dear Ms Simpson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to West Lakes Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Mike McIlroy HMI to your academy on 30 September to 1 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 a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the acting principal, other nominated staff, groups of students, the chair of governors who is also the representative of the sponsors and two representatives from the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

Context

West Lakes Academy opened in September 2008, a year earlier than initially planned in the existing buildings of one of the two predecessor schools. New buildings are currently planned for completion in December 2011. The academy is sponsored by Sellafield Ltd, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). It has subject specialisms in science and business and enterprise.

The academy is average in size with 1035 students currently on roll including 152 in the sixth form. It serves the two distinct communities of Cleator Moor and Egremont and a wide surrounding rural area stretching to the south of the academy. The proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals is slightly below the national average. Nearly all students are of White British heritage and the number of students who speak English as an additional language is low. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is slightly below the national average although the number with a statement to meet their special educational needs is similar to that of other schools. The academy is fully subscribed in the lower year groups.

The decision to accelerate the opening of the academy placed time constraints on the appointment of a principal. Consequently, the principal and chief executive of the academy took up post on the day that the academy opened in September 2008. In recognition of this, the academy was allocated a substantial education improvement grant (EIG) in order to support the principal and chief executive in the initial implementation of development plans. Almost all staff of the predecessor schools transferred to the academy when it opened. However, during the last year, there has been an extended period of staff turbulence because of high levels of staff absence and a significant number of resignations of both teaching and non-teaching staff. In July 2009, the principal and chief executive and the learning director for business and enterprise left the academy. An acting principal has been appointed from within the existing senior leadership team to lead the academy over the next twelve months. The academy has filled most staff vacancies and has increased the complement of student support staff including learning mentors from September 2009. However, there have been difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified teachers, for example in mathematics and science and there are currently a number of vacancies, including the post of learning director for business and enterprise.

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

Academy leaders accept that staff were diverted from their core purpose to raise standards and achievement during the extended period of staff turbulence over the last year. Provisional examination results for students taking GCSE examinations in Summer 2009 indicate that targets were not met. The proportion of students attaining five good passes including English and mathematics were below the national threshold expected for their age group. Consequently, the academy will be eligible for additional funding through the National Challenge initiative in order to raise attainment and achievement. Results of examinations taken by post-16 students indicate that Year 12 and Year 13 students did not make the progress expected of them relative to their starting points.

In response to the poor results attained by Key Stage 4 and post-16 students, the acting principal has renewed the focus on improving the quality of learning and

progress with all staff and action plans are being implemented to accelerate progress as a matter of urgency. The academy has experienced some problems in combining data from the two predecessor schools to inform target setting. However, leaders are confident that an accurate baseline has now been established from which progress made by different groups of students can be measured more rigorously.

Inspection evidence confirms that students are currently making satisfactory progress in their learning. This is because teaching offers a suitable range of activities that engages students and motivates them to learn. However, although there are instances where pupils make good and outstanding progress, assessment information is not used precisely enough to challenge all pupils to achieve as well as they might.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Effective transition arrangements ensured that the merger of students from the academy's two predecessor schools has been smooth. Students get on well together and feel safe in the academy. They are confident that any concerns they may have can be readily raised with staff and those interviewed were adamant that any issues of bullying are dealt with swiftly. Students' behaviour in lessons and around the academy is satisfactory and attitudes to learning are generally positive. However, in a few classes, particularly in Year 7, too much inattention and off task behaviour is tolerated by teachers. Students report that since the start of the new academic year, behaviour has improved because expectations have been made clearer to them and lunchtime arrangements have also been improved to reduce heavy congestion in dining areas. Contributing to the improvement in behaviour is the high visibility of staff, including senior staff, around the academy during break times and lunchtimes. The number of fixed-term exclusions has fallen this term as a result of a much sharper focus on tackling and remedying poor behaviour within the academy. A new system for dealing immediately with low level disruption in classes is also beginning to reduce the number of students excluded from classes.

Attendance during the last academic year was just below the academy's agreed attendance target of 92.7%. Since the start of the current academic year, attendance has been below the academy's target, due in large part to a virulent flu virus. Punctuality between lessons is variable. On the second day of the inspection a number of students arrived late for registration, partly as a result of problems with local transport.

Students have a number of opportunities to make a positive contribution to the academy's development. They are able to serve on the academy council and contribute to decisions being made about the new academy buildings although some younger students are not convinced that their views are taken fully into account. A range of extra-curricular activities enrich students' experiences. For example, a group of students have recently completed their expedition as part of the Duke of

Edinburgh's Silver award and there opportunities for students to volunteer for sporting and charitable activities.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching observed during the inspection was satisfactory overall. No inadequate teaching was observed. A positive learning environment reflects the generally good working relationships between students and adults. Students know the broad national curriculum levels they are working at and the academic targets they are working towards. Where teaching is good or better, detailed planning includes a variety of tasks that enable students to make swift progress towards the intended learning outcomes. Teachers' expectations are high and they inject a brisk pace to learning for example, by challenging students to extend their understanding through effective questioning. The quality of planning, however, is variable. Learning objectives are routinely included in planning, but in some cases plans do not indicate how the needs of students of differing abilities will be met. Consequently, work is not always challenging enough, particularly for more able students. Lessons are often too dominated by teachers and opportunities for learners to participate actively in their learning are missed.

A number of initiatives have been launched to increase the impact of the curriculum on personal and academic outcomes. For example, a new approach to learning has been introduced for younger students, which is aimed at improving key skills and attitudes towards learning. Cross-curricular links are being introduced through 'theme days' involving work across a number of subjects. The first of these has proved popular with Year 7 pupils. A weekly discrete reading session has also been introduced for Year 7 students in order to improve their reading skills. The academy is currently considering the organisation of the curriculum in Key Stage 4, given that some students find that option pathways restrict the choice of subjects they wish to study. Some appropriate alternative provision is in place for less academic students and the academy has rightly recognised there is room to develop further, the programmes of study for students aged 14 to 19. To date, the contribution of the subject specialisms to curriculum development has been limited.

Students value the way in which good behaviour, excellent effort in lessons and good attendance are celebrated and rewarded through the popular merit and reward scheme. Students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities are well cared for and supported by student support workers and learning mentors. Staff are using a range of strategies to reverse the rising trend of exclusions that was evident during the academy's first year. Plans are well advanced to offer those at risk of exclusion specific tutoring on themes such as anger management or bullying. In addition, a school counsellor is shortly to be appointed who will coordinate the reintegration into mainstream schooling of excluded students. Working closely with local education welfare officers, the academy offers a good range of support to students whose attendance is poor.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The academy runs smoothly on a day-to-day basis and leaders have been successful in amalgamating two school communities into one. This has contributed well to students' personal development and is reflected in the loyalty that they show to staff in the academy. The acting principal has provided a period of stability following many changes over the last year. She has started the new academic year by communicating clear expectations to all staff about the urgent need to raise standards. Subject leaders and staff teams have been galvanised into action and are developing plans to tackle key short-term priorities. However, the long-term educational vision for the academy is not clear and opportunities have been missed to provide a concise statement of aims that students, staff and other stakeholders can subscribe to as members of the academy community.

The decision not to allocate a significant proportion of funds made available through the EIG meant that strategies to raise standards were not implemented soon enough during the first year of the academy's existence. A simplified academy development plan for 2009 to 2010 provides a clear steer for improvement in the medium-term. Middle leaders have recently been allocated a budget to support improvement planning that is focused sharply on raising attainment. There is a new sense of optimism across the academy about what can be achieved and a determination amongst staff at all levels to meet challenging targets for all students. Initial steps have been taken to evaluate the quality of provision and its impact on outcomes. However, the contribution by the senior and middle leaders within the different learning directorates to school self-evaluation is in the early stages of development.

Systems to monitor the quality of teaching and learning provide helpful records of strengths and weaknesses in teaching. However, judgements made by academy leaders are slightly more generous than those of inspectors. This is because leaders focus more on the teaching styles being used rather than what the students are learning. Outcomes of observations have not been used routinely in the last year to identify common areas for development or to embed the good practice that exists within the academy to accelerate learning and progress.

Academy leaders accept that provision and outcomes for post-16 are inadequate. Steps have been taken to raise achievement in the short-term, through the appointment of additional student support staff and a review of sixth form provision is planned to ensure that students' needs are met more effectively.

Long-term absences within the senior leadership team, combined with the extensive range of activities associated with the building programme, have stretched the capacity of the team to operate strategically and secure improvement at the necessary pace. Progress on developing the subject specialisms across the academy has been limited. In response to the challenges presented by significant changes to

senior leadership, the acting principal has recently commissioned additional support at senior leadership level to increase the capacity of this group to tackle key priorities.

The governing body includes representatives of the sponsors and a committee structure enables governors to monitor the work of the academy. In recent months, governors have acted robustly to manage serious staffing concerns. However, checks have not been sufficiently rigorous to ensure that all statutory requirements relating to the safeguarding of children are met. Academy leaders and the representative from the DCSF accept that this is unsatisfactory. Although there is no evidence that these failings have put the safety of students at risk, this raises serious concerns about the effectiveness of leadership and management. Actions are now in hand to rectify the situation.

Governors and leaders accept that the academy has not made the progress that was expected given the firm foundations established through effective transition arrangements prior to its opening. However, team working is becoming more established. Staff at all levels are clear about the next steps needed to secure rapid improvement. A more collegiate approach to school improvement has empowered staff teams to use their existing skills more effectively and given them the confidence to seek support where necessary in order to improve outcomes for all students in the academy.

External support

The quality of external support has been variable and resulted in some conflicting messages for academy leaders. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has been responsive to the academy's requests for support. Visits to other schools and academies have proved effective in helping leaders make decisions about future curriculum development. However, in the past, some serious concerns relating to the work of the academy have not been identified or challenged soon enough by external support. Sponsors have been supportive in the development of the academy. Representatives of the three sponsors are active as governors and have been directly involved in the planning process for the new buildings. UCLAN has also made available resources to raise awareness of the Chinese culture as part of the educational vision for the academy and plans are in hand to extend partnerships to enhance the teaching of science for post-16 students.

Main Judgements

This monitoring inspection has raised very serious concerns about the standard of education provided by the academy and I am recommending a return visit as soon as possible.

Priorities for further improvement

- As a matter of urgency, ensure that all requirements for the safe recruiting of staff are met
- Use assessment information more precisely to plan learning activities that provide suitable challenge for all students and especially those who are more able
- Use the outcomes of lesson observations to identify and embed the teaching strategies that promote good learning and progress across the academy
- Improve provision and outcomes for post-16 students
- Clarify the vision for the academy and ensure that evaluation of actions taken to implement that vision focus sharply on outcomes for students

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

Sara Morrissey
Her Majesty's Inspector

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