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Mr David Terry
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Dear Mr Terry

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Oasis Academy Mediacityuk

Introduction

Following my visit with Mike McIlroy HMI to your academy on 10 to 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, scrutinized documents and met with the principal, other nominated staff, groups of students, chair of the academic council and a representative of the sponsors.

Context

Oasis Academy Mediacityuk was opened in September 2008. New buildings are currently planned for completion in September 2011 in the Salford Quays area, some two miles from the academy's present location. The academy is sponsored by Oasis Community Learning, which is part of the Oasis UK family of charities. While the academy has been designated as having a religious character, it operates an inclusive policy of admission irrespective of faith or ability. It has a subject specialism in media and information and communication technology (ICT) and a secondary



focus on business and enterprise to reflect the employment opportunities and creative focus of Salford Quays.

The academy is small with 549 students currently on roll including 40 in the recently opened sixth form. The academy new build has planned for an intake of 900 students aged 11 to 16 and 250 sixth form learners. In recent years, numbers have declined because of local concerns about the chosen site for the new academy building. The academy has responded by appointing specialist marketing staff and enhancing productive links with its local communities and feeder primary schools. The academy serves communities in the top 6% of social deprivation nationally. Currently and historically, the life chances for young people within the academy's local area have been disadvantaged by a combination of low aspirations, levels of engagement and attainment. The proportion of students who are eligible for free school meals is above 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 above the national average, although the number with a statement to meet their special educational needs is below. It is envisaged that the academy will transform the life and employment opportunities of young people living in its catchment area taking full advantage of the dynamic regeneration of Salford Quays. Formerly, the principal had been headteacher of the predecessor school for two years prior to the opening of the academy. Almost all staff of the predecessor school transferred to the academy when it opened. Staffing is currently stable and morale is high.

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

When students join the academy in Year 7, the standards they have reached in their work is below average in most cases. Low literacy levels present a considerable barrier to learning for many students. From 2007 to 2009, the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSE A* to C grades increased from 31% to 67%. The proportion of students attaining five or more A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics over a similar period has increased from 23% to 36%. However, this key indicator remains below the national average; the academy acknowledges that this is a crucial area requiring further improvement. In 2008/09, 55% of Year 11 students successfully completed the adult literacy and adult numeracy (ALAN) tests at Level 2 and a significant majority of these progressed to A-level courses at a further education college or to the recently opened academy sixth form centre. The standard of Year 10 and Year 11 students' work examined by inspectors was at least satisfactory. In lessons visited, inspectors judged that students made at least satisfactory progress. Since September 2008, effective and targeted strategies have had a positive impact on raising performance. Targets set for individual students now reflect higher expectations by teachers. The use of assessment data to identify and rectify students' underachievement and to inform them of what they need to know, or be able to do, to achieve their targets has improved. However, there remains some variability in the effective use of assessment data to plan lessons.



Girls achieve better than boys and this is reflected by a more passive engagement by boys in many lessons. Evidence from lesson observations, scrutiny of students' written work and the school's tracking procedures indicate progress to be at least satisfactory and in some subjects better. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are making good progress. Attendance has improved so that it is now at the national average.

Other relevant student outcomes

Exclusion rates have been dramatically reduced so that there were no permanent or fixed-term exclusions in 2008/09. In part, this has been achieved through the development of a restorative justice centre and inclusion zone for students. The restorative justice centre offers a time out facility where students, who are referred, are encouraged to think about repairing any harm that has been caused and rebuild relationships. Both initiatives are used alongside existing care and support systems. Students are quickly and successfully reintegrated into the mainstream school. Behaviour has improved significantly: something, which was strongly emphasized by students in their discussions with inspectors. However, inspectors noted low levels of disruptive behaviour in some lessons which limited further learning opportunities. Such incidents were related to the failure of some teachers to apply academy rules effectively. Students are well cared for and feel secure and confident within the supportive environment provided. The tutorial programme and curriculum cover topics which promote and develop healthy attitudes and lifestyles. Students have a number of opportunities to make a positive contribution to the academy's development. They are able to serve on the academy student council and have contributed to decisions made on the new buildings. Additional learning opportunities are provided after school and have a good and committed take-up. Students are making a good contribution to the local community including the mentoring of primary school pupils in reading clubs.

The effectiveness of provision

The majority of teaching observed during the monitoring visit was satisfactory and some was good. No inadequate teaching was observed. Teaching is characterised by a satisfactory pace in lessons and by generally good relationships between teachers and learners. Learning objectives are routinely displayed so that students know the purpose of the lesson. There is scope for teachers to refer back to these more frequently in the course of the one hundred minute lessons that the academy has adopted. The resources used in lessons are varied and are typically well prepared. For example, ICT is used effectively in many instances to introduce new concepts and to reinforce learning. Teachers plan according to the academy's agreed planning format which encourages them to match work to students' abilities. Too often, however, this does not happen in practice. The academy's growing wealth of data is not fully utilised by teachers when they plan and in too many lessons students of all abilities are expected to complete the same work. Consequently, more able students



were not always effectively challenged. In some lessons, there is too much teacher talk and opportunities are therefore missed to engage students more fully in their learning and to develop their speaking and thinking skills. Most students' books are marked. However, much marking is of a celebratory nature and does not yet offer students clear enough or sufficient guidance on the next steps they must take in order to improve their work. In some classes, expectations by teachers of how students' written work should be presented are not high enough. Links with the academy's business and enterprise specialism are exploited by teachers in a number of lessons, but some useful opportunities to develop pupils' oral and literacy skills are missed.

Where teaching was stronger, it is marked by its brisk pace, high expectations of what students could achieve and by an insistence on good behaviour and attentiveness to their tasks. New concepts are explained clearly and students' understanding of them regularly checked. Effective questioning revises learning points, maintains students' attention and encourages them to think deeply and reflectively about their answers. Time is well used. The progress made by students in lessons observed was satisfactory overall. Most are willing to learn. Behaviour is satisfactory and some is good. However, in some lessons, too much low-level disruptive behaviour was tolerated which slowed the pace of learning and which distracted others from their work.

Curriculum provision is increasingly well matched to the range of different student needs. Good links have been established with primary schools to support transition. These links are further enhanced through a range of subjects offered to primary feeder school pupils such as ICT, food technology, art projects and philosophy for children. The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been enhanced through the introduction of creative and applied curriculum competency-based programmes in Year 7 and 8. For example, the Year 8 applied creative curriculum combines aspects of art, humanities, media and technology as well as further reinforcement of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Personalised pathways in Year 9 enable some students to take early entry GCSE in languages, art and religious education and in Year 10 continue the course of study to A level. Alternative curriculum provision for disengaged students in Year 9 has impacted positively on inclusion rates. Personalised learning pathways at Key Stage 4 have enhanced learning opportunities. Good and improving collaborative arrangements with other institutions, including the University of Salford, a further education college and another local academy, enable the curriculum to be more closely tailored to individual requirements. Vocational courses have been expanded to provide a curriculum that meets the needs of all students. Year 10 and Year 11 students spoke enthusiastically about philosophy lessons and the opportunity they provided to think and explore ideas in a different way. The development of literacy and oracy is not sufficiently embedded across the curriculum. The academy acknowledges this and has recently made a new appointment to develop and implement appropriate strategies. The provision of ICT in support of teaching and learning is good. Progression rates to further education are good and increasing.



Data indicate that the number of students leaving the academy that are not in education, employment or training is low and well below the area average.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The principal's determined and clear-sighted leadership has successfully guided the predecessor school's smooth transition into an academy. Considerable resources have been spent in improving the academy's buildings and there has been a significant increase in ICT resources in classrooms. The academy is run efficiently on a day-to-day basis. Staff share the academy's vision of rising standards and the provision of an inclusive education that seeks to bring out the potential in each individual through a 'can do' approach.

The academy's self-evaluation procedures are well developed and are also well considered. Its development plan contains appropriate targets for improvement but there is some scope to add more detail to identified milestones so that progress towards targets can be more easily measured. Appropriate departmental development plans have also been drawn up by middle leaders. A number of staffing absences have been dealt with well so that continuity of learning has been maintained in key departments and where necessary these have been strengthened by the addition of experienced staff.

A number of carefully thought through initiatives have contributed to the improvement in standards recorded in 2009. The curriculum has been strengthened and early entry to national examinations for Year 11 students has helped identify gaps in students' learning and inform appropriate intervention strategies. Students' attendance has benefited from the funding of a before and after-school bus which makes some students' journeys to the academy much easier. The use of data is becoming more embedded in the daily life of the academy, although there is scope to ensure that teachers make greater use of assessment information when planning lessons.

Procedures for the performance management systems are in place. Satisfactory systems exist to regularly monitor pupils' work, teachers' planning and the quality of teaching and learning. Following training, the monitoring of lessons is carried out by the academy's leadership team and by Directors of Learning, who are continuing to grow into this role. The school's overall evaluations of the effectiveness of teaching are more generous than that found by inspectors. Consequently, there is scope for monitoring procedures to be much more robust so that inconsistencies in the application of the academy's rules and issues that impede the pace of learning, such as a lack of differentiation and off-task behaviour, are swiftly identified and tackled. 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 on the progress students make.



A number of steps have been taken to promote effective teaching. A teaching and learning policy has been written and the staff handbook usefully contains guidance on what constitutes good teaching. Several training sessions have been held where the key components of a good lesson have been outlined. Five 'teacher learning communities' have been set up across departments. These have increased the amount of professional dialogue between staff about how teaching can be improved. A number of staff have had the opportunity to visit other settings, such as sister academies within the Oasis family, to observe good practice in teaching but existing good practice within the academy is not fully taken advantage of. However, these measures to improve teaching are not embedded firmly enough to ensure the necessary, rapid improvement in its quality.

Good pastoral systems are in place. These offer good support to pupils at risk of disaffection or exclusion. Learners consider that the behaviour system which is based on a balance of rewards and sanctions is both fair and effective. Effective steps have been taken to develop the academy's relationships with parents and the local community. There are suitable plans to involve parents in the planning and development of the new building. A member of staff has been appointed to develop community links and a successful community day has been held. Good links are also being developed with local primary schools, some of whom visit the academy to make use of its ICT and food technology facilities. The academy has also opened its own sixth form. This had a positive impact on the level of students who are not in education, employment or training in the locality and caters well for the needs of the some of the academy's more vulnerable students.

The recent rise in attendance, reduction in exclusion, improvement in overall GCSE results and in the proportion of students achieving five A* to C including English and mathematics, indicate that the academy's capacity to improve is good.

External support

The Academy Improvement Partner is a regular visitor to the academy and provides thorough reports on its work. Links with the academy's partner academies are continuing to grow and representatives from its sponsors visit regularly to assess and discuss its progress and to provide advice. The academy council has been proactive in developing links between the academy's proposed media specialism and a national broadcasting company. Strong links have also been forged with a nearby university and these are helping to raise the aspirations of learners. The academy has also drawn heavily on the support of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.



Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the percentage of students gaining good grades at GCSE in English and mathematics.
- Share good practice across the curriculum so that inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning are tackled and all students have the opportunity to engage in consistently challenging learning.
- Embed an effective literacy and oracy strategy across the curriculum.
- Sharpen monitoring procedures so that inconsistencies in the application of the academy's rules and systems are swiftly identified and tackled.

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

Yours sincerely

Patrick Geraghty
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF