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Mr Paul Prest
Chief Executive
Academy 360
Portsmouth Road
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Dear Mr Prest

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Academy 360

Introduction

Following my visit with Brian Blake HMI to your academy on the 19 and 20 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 chief executive, the executive director, the executive leadership team, middle leaders, students and representatives of the sponsors.

Context

The academy opened in September 2008. Its opening was accelerated. During its first year it operated on two sites in the same accommodation as its predecessor schools. The academy moved into its new building in September 2009. Building work is still taking place on the site. The sponsors are Gentoo (lead) and Sunderland City Council. In the half term before the academy opened there was a significant turnover of staff in the predecessor secondary school. Twenty one teachers left at the end of the final term, this figure included most members of the senior leadership team and all but one of the mathematics department. The academy could not

appoint suitably qualified replacements for the start of the new term so a very high proportion of lessons were taught by temporary or supply teachers. The academy did not have a full complement of staff until January 2009.

All pupils from the predecessor schools transferred into the academy. There are 1040 pupils between the ages of 4 and 16 on roll. Most are of White British heritage and there is a very small proportion from other ethnic groups. No pupils are at an early stage of learning English. A well above average proportion of pupils is eligible for free school meals. The proportion identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above average. The academy hosts a local authority provision for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and other associated needs and as a result the proportion with a statement of special educational need is also well above average. Pupils are taught in three phases spanning National Curriculum key stages. Children in the Reception class and Year 1 are taught in a Foundation Unit. The specialism is business and enterprise through innovation.

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

When children join the academy, in the Reception class, most can do much less than others of their age. They make good progress during their first year in the academy and most acquire the skills needed to begin more formal learning. However, they are not always equally proficient in all aspects of their development. The academy has introduced the Foundation Unit for children in the Reception class and Year 1 because it recognises that most will benefit from a second year of play-based learning. Children in both year groups make good progress because the activities provided for them are based on the outcomes of rigorous and regular assessment. They are happy, confident and enthusiastic learners.

Pupils in Key Stages 1 to 4 do not achieve well enough and their attainment is inadequate. The academy was disappointed but not surprised by the outcomes of national tests and examinations in 2009. Most outcomes were less positive than in the last year of the predecessor schools and the academy did not meet its challenging targets. Some small gains were made, particularly at Key Stage 4, but the wider and very significant difficulties faced by the academy in its first term of operation had a negative impact on pupils' achievement. Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities progressed at the same rate as their peers. The academy is determined to improve matters in 2010 and it has set ambitious targets but much remains to be done.

There is a significant legacy of under achievement. A very high proportion of pupils entered the academy with weak reading skills. A systematic and structured programme designed to improve reading has been introduced in Years 1 to 8 and it is already having a very positive impact. The content of lessons is accurately matched to pupils' current levels of competence and regular assessments ensure that they make progress in every lesson. The programme is helping them to apply higher order reading skills and become fluent readers. It is also having a marked impact on their speaking and listening skills. The academy feels that in the longer

term this will also improve pupils' writing skills but this is some way off. Many pupils do not form letters correctly and have not developed a fluent joined script. They struggle to spell some of the most commonly used words and apply only the most basic forms of punctuation. Pupils do not organise and present their work effectively and they are not developing good work habits, this is a particular issue in Years 9 to 11. The leadership team has identified these issues but it has not provided staff with sufficient detailed guidance to ensure that they are tackled systematically and that consistent practice and expectations are adopted throughout the academy. The academy plans to develop writing skills across the curriculum. Evidence from the work scrutiny indicates that many teachers will need additional training to help them promote literacy skills effectively while retaining the subject specific focus of the lesson. Pupils do not progress well enough in mathematics and science because the tasks they are given are not challenging enough. The oldest and most able pupils spend too much time repeating activities mastered in previous years. Although most of the work in their books is correct they are not making progress swiftly enough.

The academy has improved pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour in lessons. A consistently applied and very helpful system of verbal and non-verbal prompts is having a very positive impact on the learning of pupils in Years 1 to 8. The academy has introduced a system of research-based learning. This provides pupils with plentiful opportunities to work with a partner or as part of a small group. The 'team' responds to questions or presents the ideas of the group. When it is applied consistently this way of working helps pupils to develop effective learning skills. Pupils are keen to answer questions or offer their ideas. They are active participants in the lesson and can identify what they have learned and the next steps to take. They make good progress and enjoy their learning. However, a relatively high proportion of teachers are continuing to teach as they have always done, particularly in older year groups. This limits pupils' progress and leads to low level disruptive behaviour.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Many pupils have low self-esteem. They do not have high aspirations because they have too little experience of life outside of the immediate area. Although more students went on to education, employment or training in 2009 than did so in previous years the proportion remains below average. Pupils of all ages provide sensible and well considered responses when asked about life in the academy. They like the 'all-through' provision and they feel that they have settled into the academy well. They say that they feel safe and have no concerns about bullying. Older pupils grumble about having to stay in at lunchtime or wear uniform but there is an emerging, if grudging, acceptance that these measures may be for the best. Pupils like some of the new facilities and their views about what needs to be improved are closely aligned to those of the staff and senior team. Younger pupils say that they like the academy and enjoy lessons but pupils from Year 5 upwards are not as positive. This may be because they have not had time to develop a sense of pride in the academy or because it is not 'cool' to enjoy learning. Despite this slightly negative impression older pupils are keen to contribute to the academy's

development. They say that opportunities to do so are limited at present although they are aware that there are plans to improve this. Pupils have some small but important concerns about the cost and quality of school lunches, the absence of a Year 11 football team, and the design of the toilets but they do not appear to have a formal mechanism through which to air these concerns. Attendance is inadequate and a high proportion of pupils are persistent non-attenders. Although the academy, with the support of the local authority, is making some inroads into reducing this through targeted first-day call-out and challenging unauthorised absence, much remains to be done to bring the overall attendance rate back to an acceptable level. Older pupils say that behaviour has improved but some challenges remain. The academy excluded a very high proportion of pupils during its first few months. This figure declined significantly as the year progressed and pupils complied with new expectations.

The effectiveness of provision

The provision made for children in the Reception Year and Year 1 is satisfactory and improving rapidly. Children in the unit get off to a good start with their education. Their progress is carefully tracked and staff use the information gained from assessment to plan activities which help children of different ages and abilities to thrive and make progress. Staff have ensured that children feel safe and that they develop independent and co-operative learning skills within a safe and carefully planned environment. The restrictions caused by building work and issues with the outdoor environment mean that opportunities for children to learn outdoors are more restricted than the academy would like but staff make the best use of the space which is available. Staff review the curriculum offered to children and ensure that it is appropriately balanced and that it meets all the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Teaching in Years 2 to 11 is not good enough to tackle pupils' underachievement and provide a secure foundation for new learning. Pupils do not make consistent progress because the provision made for them is too variable. In the best lessons teachers are implementing the new curriculum very effectively. Lessons proceed at a brisk pace and teacher talk is kept to a minimum. A number of well-planned activities help pupils to apply research skills and consolidate their learning. In these lessons pupils make good progress. However, there are too few lessons of this quality. The academy has not established consistent systems in all aspects of its work. As a result some teachers continue to use systems from the predecessor schools and pupils not receive clear messages about what is expected or how things are done in the academy.

The provision made for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities in mainstream classes is the same as that made for other pupils. When teaching is good they progress at similar rates to their peers. Where provision is less good they do not progress well because they lose interest and their behaviour deteriorates. This affects their learning and that of other pupils in the class. Pupils with moderate learning difficulties are well provided for and receive targeted support which meets

their needs. The provision made for disaffected older pupils is improving rapidly. An off-site provision is being established in the local area. Pupils have chosen a name which reflects its status as part of the academy and staff are planning relevant courses and activities.

The chief executive and sponsors have a clear vision for the academy and have introduced a curriculum which will, in the longer term, engage pupils and help them to achieve well. However, some of these initiatives are at a relatively early stage of implementation and have yet to make the impact intended. For example, the 'international curriculum' is too imprecise in terms of how it will be taught so some work does not allow pupils to build on previous learning. Pupils use information and communication technology (ICT) as a resource for learning and ICT underpins all curriculum innovation. It is too early to judge the impact of the specialism but plans for its development place it firmly at the centre of raising pupils' attainment and developing the academy.

Pupils are adequately cared for. Relationships are generally good. Pupils respond well to the system of non-verbal prompts and more serious reminders are given tactfully. Pupils are encouraged to reflect on their behaviour and are given every opportunity to apologise for their mistakes and to move forward. They are helped to lead healthy lifestyles and good hygiene is encouraged through the provision of anti-bacterial hand wash in every room. The provision made for vulnerable pupils is good. The academy has implemented all the latest guidance on safeguarding pupils.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory overall. The leadership of the chief executive is good. He shares the sponsor's ambitious but achievable aspirations for the academy and early evidence indicates that he has the ability and skill to bring them to fruition. He is very well supported by the executive director and the small but highly focused executive leadership team. The academy did not progress as rapidly as the senior team might have wished during its first year because it faced considerable and unexpected challenges. However, gains were made most notably in students' behaviour and their attitudes to learning. The move into the new building was accomplished successfully and after four weeks the academy is a well ordered and cohesive community. The executive team has an accurate view of the academy's effectiveness and weaknesses are tackled robustly. Leadership is developing at all levels but, at this early stage, not all middle leaders are equally effective. Plans made to improve the academy do not provide sufficient detail to help middle leaders carry out their work effectively. It is not clear how targets will be reached or how the impact of planned actions will be monitored or evaluated. As a result middle leaders collect a great deal of information but do not analyse it well enough to show where value is being added or where further improvement is needed. The specialism is effectively led and managed.

The main sponsor is very involved in the academy's day-to-day development. Representatives of the sponsor sit on the trust board. They know the area well and

have longstanding relationships with residents. This is helping the academy to establish links with the local community. Board members support the chief executive and his team but, because they are very well informed about all aspects of the academy's work, they also challenge the team and hold it to account. The academy has satisfactory capacity to improve further.

External support

The academy reports that it has received good support from the local authority's Early Years Foundation Stage team and from its safeguarding officer. The school improvement partner (SIP) has a good understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses. The SIP reports provide useful analysis and help the academy to focus on the most important areas for improvement. The reports include short-term targets which are evaluated on the next visit. The academy has employed consultants from a successful secondary school to help it set challenging targets and develop its assertive mentoring programme.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve attendance.
- Eradicate weaknesses in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy in order to ensure that students' achievement accelerates.
- Improve students' attainment by ensuring that teachers comply with new requirements and receive effective guidance which helps them to improve.
- Ensure that students and their parents make a positive contribution to the academy.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, 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

Christine Graham
Her Majesty's Inspector

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