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Mr Howard Lay
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Dear Mr Lay

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Open Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Heather Weston HMI to your academy on 4 and 5 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 a wide range of documents and met with the acting principal, the senior leadership team, the head of sixth form, special needs coordinator, a group of middle leaders, two directors of specialism and two groups of students. Inspectors also had telephone conversations with the chair of governors and a representative of the academies group at the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Inspectors observed 14 part-lessons representative of all year groups, including some joint observations with senior staff and attended a house assembly.

Context

Open academy opened in September 2008 for students aged 11-18 following the closure of the predecessor school. It currently uses the same buildings as the predecessor school but will move into new purpose-built accommodation on the site in September 2010. The academy specialises in engineering and the environment.

The academy is smaller than average with 490 students and is currently under-subscribed. It serves a local community in north Norwich, an area with some deprivation. Forty nine students attend the academy's small sixth form, part of 'The Kett', a partnership with two other local schools. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is above the national average. Most students are White British, very few are from minority ethnic backgrounds. Student mobility is higher than average and a significant number of students join the academy later than in Year 7. The proportion of students that have special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above average.

The vast majority of staff from the predecessor school transferred to the academy. The academy has experienced some difficulties in recruiting teachers but currently it has a full complement of staff. An accelerated opening contributed towards a period of difficulty and uncertainty within the local community and this impacted on staff, students and their parents. Staff are working with all stakeholders to overcome these difficulties but acknowledge that more needs to be done to secure the full support of the community. The previous headteacher left the academy in June 2009. In September 2009, governors appointed a headteacher who is a National Leader in Education as acting principal for three days per week until a permanent appointment is made in 2010. The school became a National Challenge school in 2009.

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

On entry to the academy in Year 7, students' prior attainment is below national averages, particularly in English and mathematics and their basic literacy and numeracy skills are under-developed. Standards in the predecessor school were below national averages in its final three years: results dropped significantly in 2008; only 16 percent of Year 11 students attained at least five A* to C grades including English and mathematics. The Open Academy inherited this legacy of under-achievement and low standards.

The academy has made an immediate impact on raising standards. In its first year of opening, results have risen significantly. This year, the proportion of Year 11 students attaining five or more GCSEs including English and mathematics doubled to 32 percent. This exceeded the academy's targets and national floor targets. In addition, the proportion of students attaining five or more A* to C grades increased from 35% to 48% this year. These significant improvements are a direct result of better quality teaching to support learning, and effective intervention to identify and support those students on the C to D grade borderline in GCSE examinations.

The academy inherited some inadequate curriculum arrangements which meant that not all Year 11 students were entered for all examinations in 2009. It has had less impact in increasing the percentage of students attaining five or more A* to G grades which was well below the national average this year. Standards vary dramatically across subjects. For example; GCSE results in English literature, history

and travel and tourism are well above average but are significantly below average in science, design technology, geography, music and physical education. Eleven students attained a National Vocational Qualification through the Young Apprenticeship scheme. Notably, this award in Engineering is equivalent to six GCSE C grades and is one of the academy's specialist areas.

The majority of Year 13 students achieved or exceeded their targets in Advanced level examinations in 2009. This was not the case in Year 12, where a significant proportion of students did not achieve their target grades in Advanced Subsidiary examinations. The majority of students studying for vocational awards attained a merit or pass award.

Observations by inspectors confirmed that based on their below average starting points, the majority of students make satisfactory progress in lessons. They work steadily in most lessons and enthuse when given opportunities to learn together on practical tasks. However, under-achievement remains in some subjects, particularly in Key Stage 4 where lessons sometimes fail to capture students' interest which leads to students becoming bored and de-motivated. This is compounded by the persistent absence of a small but significant minority of students, especially in Year 11 which has an adverse affect upon their learning and progress. The good support provided outside of lessons for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities through 'The Link' and 'The Bridge' is undermined in lessons by teachers who do not plan suitable work or deploy teaching assistants effectively to help these students learn.

The academy has a satisfactory understanding of students' achievement across subjects but does not collate accurate comparative data on the performance of different groups of students such as boys and girls, or those that have special educational needs and/or disabilities. Many subjects keep their own records to track students' progress but this is not consistent across the whole academy. Data is not coordinated centrally to provide a detailed picture of how well individuals and groups of students are doing or which of them need additional support. Senior leaders acknowledge that assessment procedures lack rigour and new systematic arrangements are urgently needed so that all staff have accurate data to gauge the performance of individual students. The implementation of improved tracking procedures is under way.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students say they enjoy life at the academy. Despite this, overall attendance rates are consistently lower than the national average and too many students are persistently absent. These students are not developing the good habits needed for the work place that will help them to secure their future economic well-being. Since opening, insufficient action has been taken to improve attendance and reduce persistent absence. Students have a satisfactory awareness of healthy lifestyles;

they participate in two hours of PE each week and recognise the importance of healthy eating and exercise. Sex and relationships education and the use of drugs and alcohol are addressed through citizenship, but students feel that not enough time is allocated for personal, social and health education.

Students report that their views are sought and that they have a voice in the life of the academy, through house councils and the academy council. However, they feel that they were not sufficiently consulted about the new behaviour policy and are currently confused by procedures for 'cover'. Although the school has evidence to show a significant reduction in the number of students removed from lessons so far this year, inspectors noted that too many teachers send students to the cover area rather than address minor behavioural issues as they occur in lessons. Consequently behaviour management procedures are inconsistent and not always effective. Overall, behaviour has improved since the academy opened which has led to a significant reduction in the number of students excluded so far this year. Students feel safe and told inspectors that when bullying does take place they are confident that staff will deal with incidents appropriately.

Post 16 students reported that they enjoyed life in the sixth form, valued the provision made for them and felt that they were making progress as a result of the good support they receive from their teachers and tutors.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors' evidence does not support the academy's view that the quality of teaching and its impact on learning is good. The majority of teaching seen by inspectors was satisfactory, occasionally good and at times, inadequate. Increased lesson monitoring by senior leaders is beginning to identify where the strengths and weaknesses lie. In most lessons students show interest in their learning and share positive relations with their teachers and their peers. In the best lessons, planning is tailored to meet students' needs with sufficient challenge for those more able, gifted or talented. Teachers use their good subject knowledge to plan activities that stimulate interest and test students' understanding through probing questioning. However, questions are directed too often at a few individuals willing to answer and not all students are sufficiently challenged to contribute or engage in group discussion. In the least effective lessons students sit in rows, often apart from others which limit opportunities for them to work together in pairs or groups, or work independently of the teacher. These lessons are dominated by too much teacher-talk and a lack of active learning. Consequently students' interest wanes and they become either compliant or disruptive.

Assessment information is not used effectively by the majority of teachers to plan lessons that meet the needs of students of different abilities and interests, so students often find their work too easy or too hard. Lesson plans pay cursory attention to differentiating learning to meet the full range of students' needs. This is

a fundamental weakness that restricts students' progress and achievement. A scrutiny of students' work by inspectors revealed that marking is, at best inconsistent. It does not provide students with regular, useful feedback on how well they are doing against the targets set for them or tell them how to improve their work. The poor presentation of students' work reflects the low expectations of many teachers. Although teachers' planning identifies clear learning outcomes, these are not communicated effectively during introductory activities to explain what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do by the end of the lesson.

The academy is in the process of revitalising the curriculum. Since September, students in Year 7 have followed a programme of practical, thematic learning designed to promote their basic skills, and includes opportunities to learn Spanish. Year 9 students select from a broad programme of options. Additional vocational courses have been introduced for students in Key Stage 4, including alternative arrangements and work placements for some students not suited to GCSE studies. These developments are quite new and require more time before their impact on students' achievement can be accurately gauged. Students enjoy the exciting range of enrichment activities on 'extension Thursdays'. These together with educational visits, environment projects and visiting speakers to the academy add significantly to students' enjoyment.

Students are kept safe and all statutory safeguarding arrangements are securely in place. Increased liaison with primary schools is helping to improve induction into Year 7 and increase prospective parents' understanding of the work of the academy. Students benefit from guidance and advice offered by Connexions and careers advisors based on-site and all of them experience the world of work through a work placement. The needs of vulnerable pupils, students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those at risk of exclusion are met through effective support from academy staff and through partnership working with outside agencies, but reviews of their needs and how well they are being met are not being carried out effectively due to lack of staff training. Senior leaders recognise that too many students have been placed on the special needs register unnecessarily which places too much strain on the resources of the special education needs co-ordinator.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The senior management team has ensured that, during a very turbulent phase of opening, including a major building project on the school site and the departure of the academy leader, standards have risen. The newly appointed acting principal is providing strategic leadership by adding further clarity and coherence to the academy's purpose and, at the same time prioritising the importance of demonstrating significant improvements. He has made an immediate impact; his accurate and thorough evaluation of the academy's current strengths and weaknesses has identified what immediate actions are required to build upon the

improvements made this year. He has shared his ambitions for the academy with stakeholders and has the full support of staff, governors and sponsors.

Improved line management of middle leaders is providing them with the support and guidance they need to develop their areas of responsibility further and making them much more accountable. Leadership and management of the sixth form has been strengthened following the recent appointment of a head of sixth form. Senior leaders have begun to distribute responsibility for school improvement to all leaders and managers. Some key middle leaders have responded very positively to this; saying that they feel empowered and liberated to make decisions. They are displaying an increasing awareness of the issues facing the academy and their role in driving improvements. This is not the case with all middle leaders, particularly some subject leaders whose areas are under-performing. Self-evaluation at departmental level is underdeveloped and is not aligned to development planning. Leaders and managers are demonstrating that they have the capacity to make improvements, particularly in raising attainment. However, actions taken to raise attendance, embed assessment and ensure that lessons meet the needs of all learners have not yet led to significant improvements.

Governance has changed this year and a new chair of governors has been appointed. Governors have acted decisively to strengthen strategic leadership and management of the academy. They demonstrate a clear vision for the academy but this is not yet fully understood or shared throughout the academy or the local community. Detailed strategic plans are in place but governors are not sufficiently proactive in ensuring that these developments are realised. Their involvement in monitoring the progress made in improving students' achievement, the quality of provision and the effectiveness of all leaders and managers is under-developed.

External support

The school improvement partner provides an accurate evaluation of the academy's performance but does not externally validate the academy's judgements on lesson quality or on the effectiveness of middle management. Relations with the local authority have been strained since the opening of the academy. Support for the monitoring of attendance from the local authority was withdrawn at the start of this year which has reduced the impact of strategies used by the academy to improve attendance or reduce persistent absence.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress. This monitoring inspection has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the academy's performance will be monitored.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the quality of assessment by:
 - embedding systematic monitoring procedures so that teachers and managers have accurate assessment data to track how well students are doing
 - using this data to inform lesson planning and designing different learning activities that meet the needs of all students
 - identifying at an early stage which students are at risk of underachieving and coordinate additional support for them
 - giving students accurate feedback on how well they are progressing and setting them targets to help them improve their work
- Increase the amount of good or better lessons so that all students achieve what they are capable of by:
 - identifying teachers who demonstrate best practice and using them to model highly effective teaching and learning
 - allowing effective teachers to monitor each others' work and taking effective action to support and challenge staff identified through rigorous monitoring as under-performing
 - ensuring that students with special educational needs and/or disabilities receive effective in-class support that meets their learning needs.
- Raise attendance and reduce persistent absence so that both are similar to national averages by:
 - prioritising attendance monitoring and by mobilising support from all external agencies to encourage those that are persistently absent back into school
 - raising parental awareness of the importance of regular attendance and the role they must play in helping to secure their child's future economic well-being
 - promoting further inducements and rewards for students who regularly attend
- Improve the strategic development of the academy by:

- streamlining plans for improvement so they are concise, manageable and focused upon the immediate priorities of the academy
- ensuring that governors adopt a 'hands-on' approach to monitoring the implementation and the impact of development plans
- engaging with the local community to develop a full understanding of what the academy is trying to do for them

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

John Mitcheson.
Her Majesty's Inspector