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Mrs Philomena Marshall
Executive Principal
Excelsior Academy
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Dear Mrs Marshall

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Excelsior Academy Introduction

Following my visit with Christine Graham HMI to your academy on 25 and 26 February 2010, 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 the first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the chair of governors, the executive principal, individual school principals, nominated staff, groups of students and the School Improvement Partner.

Context

Excelsior Academy opened in September 2008 in new purpose built accommodation. It has capacity for 1500 students with a further 300 in post-16 provision. Currently, there are just under 1200 students on roll including 92 in the sixth form.

It operates a 'schools within a school' framework, with four autonomous 11 to 16 schools and a sixth form college. Each has its own management structure, school principal, staff, pupils, curriculum and timetable. These schools and the college operate within the academy's over-arching policy framework and are directly accountable to the executive principal who leads the academy.

The academy's specialism is business enterprise, although each of the four 11 to 16 schools takes responsibility for leading on one of four academy-wide specialist areas: Armstrong School – Business and Economics; Hadrian School – Environment,



Technology and Design; Jefferson School – Creative and Performing Arts; Milburn School – Health Related Studies. The academy is sponsored by Irvine Laidlaw (Lord Laidlaw). About 70% of the staff transferred from the predecessor school. The executive principal and three of the 11 to 16 school principals were appointed to the academy.

The academy serves inner-city communities across a swathe of the city's western suburbs. Free school meal entitlement is significantly in excess of the national average. A very high proportion of students enter the academy during term time and many in this group are from overseas. Those from minority ethnic communities comprise approximately one third of the student population with about 30% speaking English as an additional language. The number of students identified with special educational needs and/or disabilities is significantly above average and in some year groups represents over half of the students.

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

Students' attainment on entry to the academy is exceptionally low. The majority have very weak basic skills and this presents a major barrier to their learning and progress. In 2009, standards attained by the majority of students after two terms at the academy were significantly below average and most made well below average progress. Girls outperformed boys against all major headline GCSE grades at Key Stage 4. There is, however, a noticeable improvement in the performance of the current cohort of students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Detailed assessment information, supported by inspection evidence, shows that a higher proportion of students are making more secure gains in their learning than in 2009. At Key Stage 3, for example, a much greater number of students are now functioning at Level 5 in English and mathematics. Key Stage 4 results from early entry GCSE examinations show that 23% of students have attained a grade C or above in English and a similar proportion have done so in mathematics. The 2009 examination performance from the few students who transferred from the predecessor school into the college sixth form was low, although all students gained some qualifications. Assessment evidence from the college suggests that in most subjects standards are rising with students making better progress in line with their targets than in the previous year. The strongest performance among sixth form subjects is in information and communication technology (ICT), drama and the performing arts.

The academy makes good use of rigorous tracking data to map students' performance against their targets. This is providing a secure basis for identifying underachievement and from which targeted interventions can occur to support those students who are falling behind. However, too many teachers are not capitalising on this information when lessons are being planned and this is limiting students' learning.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students greatly benefit from the 'schools within a school' structure. The relatively small school context has ensured that the pastoral and learning needs of each student are well known and understood. They meet regularly with their mentors so that academic progress can be checked and personal matters attended to. Students say they feel secure and well supported in this environment. They are proud of their association with the academy with the large majority showing respect for each other and their surroundings. Students' behaviour overall is satisfactory but is often good because the academy has been steadfast in establishing clear rules and routines to promote good behaviour and to raise students' expectations of themselves in relation to their academic attainment and their personal conduct. The impact of this strategy is evident in classrooms because in the majority of lessons students show a willingness to engage in learning and demonstrate personal responsibility for completing tasks. Most listen attentively to their teachers and work cooperatively with their peers.

Although there has been a modest reduction, stubbornly high levels of absence remain a significant challenge for the academy. The well considered strategy and significant investment in staff resources is having an impact, most noticeably at Key Stage 3. However, the number of persistent absentees at Key Stage 4 remains very high. Fixed term exclusions are reducing but remain too frequent. There have, however, been no permanent exclusions.

The effectiveness of provision

Teachers demonstrate an enthusiasm for their work and have developed positive relationships with students. They are working hard to raise students' aspirations and to establish constructive attitudes to learning.

An equal balance of satisfactory and good teaching was observed during the inspection. At its best, teachers ensure that the curriculum is well adapted to meeting students' needs because lesson planning focuses precisely on what students will learn and takes account of all abilities. Teachers use probing questions to challenge students' thinking and students respond enthusiastically, showing a real interest in their studies and a keen desire to improve. Students are encouraged to reflect on their own learning and what is required to improve further. This results in lively discussion, varied and interesting activities with students making good strides in their learning and confidence.

In satisfactory lessons teachers do not take enough account of students' prior learning and, consequently, tasks are not well enough adapted to their needs. While teachers do engage productively with individual students to support their work, weak basic skills mean that too often those who are left unsupported are unable to fully complete their tasks. This situation will do little to raise standards.



The academy is continuing to develop a curriculum to reflect the diverse needs, interests and aspirations of all its students. There is a clear emphasis on developing a suitable balance between academic, vocational and work-related learning opportunities. This reflects effective engagement with a range of providers to extend the curriculum and demonstrates the academy's strategy to provide a finely-tuned and personalised offer to all students. Courses available to students in Years 10 and 11 are increasingly well supported through the use of the academy's specialist status with further modifications to the Year 10 curriculum being considered which will further reflect the interests and aspirations of the student body. The establishment of an off-site pupil referral unit (PRU) to cater more directly for the needs of the most vulnerable students is well considered and proving effective in re-engaging them in learning and in reducing exclusion rates.

In the sixth form, the college presently offers a range of level 2 and 3 courses. A broadening range of provision is geared towards attracting and retaining a higher number of students and is seeking to establish a 'niche' character in order to compete with the significant range of post-16 provision in the area. In discussion with students there is a clear willingness on their part to consider pursuing their studies at the academy and this suggests a growing confidence in what it offers.

Pupils consider the academy's enrichment provision to be a strength. An extensive and varied range of opportunities are offered to students which they talk positively about. The academy has introduced a number of incentives to encourage students to achieve academically and to enable them to experience life beyond their immediate environs. The sponsor, for example, has made a generous financial commitment to support extra-curricular activities, visits, hobbies and family learning.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The sponsor and senior leaders have established a clear educational direction focused securely on improving the quality of provision as the basis for raising standards. Their principles are rooted in high expectations for all students and in tackling underachievement and low attendance. Common policies and procedures ensure that the academy operates efficiently. The executive principal has established robust lines of accountability and has a secure grasp on the academy's performance and that of the individual schools and the college.

Assessment information is collated systematically and is rigorously scrutinised in order to identify weaknesses and pursue improvement. Actions to tackle underperformance are timely and well considered and the impact is evident in higher attainment, although much further progress is required to raise attendance and reduce exclusions. The academy's improvement plan outlines key priorities and promotes a culture of self-evaluation. It is securely aligned to where improvement is required most and is linked directly to subsequent staff training.

The chair of governors is very well informed about the academy's progress and shares the leadership's vision for the academy. He has a keen understanding of its



performance and the challenges it faces. A clear strategy for governor development is in place with greater on-site involvement. Governors are well placed to offer strong support and challenge. Safeguarding procedures are robust and effectively monitored.

External support

The academy has developed good links with an extensive range of partners and organisations. Rigorous evaluation reports provided by the School Improvement Partner, who is also the National Challenge Adviser, are helping the academy to keep its progress under review, with clear recommendations for further action.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve the use of formative and summative assessment information when lessons are being prepared so that activities consistently meet the learning needs of all students.
- Continue to reduce absence, including persistent absence and further reduce exclusions.

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

Tom Grieveson
Her Majesty's Inspector