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Miss Rebecca Clark
Principal
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Dear Miss Clark

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Oasis Academy Bristol

Introduction

Following my visit with Mary Massey HMI to your academy on 27-28 January 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 a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, other nominated staff, the school improvement partner, an external consultant, groups of pupils, parents, the chair of the academy council, and a representative of the sponsors.

Context

The Oasis Academy Bristol opened in September 2008. It is currently housed in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. However, on site new buildings are nearing completion and the move is scheduled for July 2010.

The academy's sole sponsor is Oasis Community Learning. The academy has a specialism in visual and performing arts. There are currently 537 students aged 11 to 16 years on roll. The area served by the academy is one of significant social and economic disadvantage. A large majority of the students are from one of the most

deprived wards in the country and one third of students are eligible for free school meals. The vast majority of students are White British and very few speak English as an additional language. Just under half of all students have been identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. The academy has significant involvement with the local primary schools.

Almost all of the staff of the predecessor school transferred to the academy when it opened. Following the unexpected death of the new principal, just six months after opening, one of the vice principals took up the interim position and was appointed to the substantive post at the start of the summer term 2009. Following an independent management review in October 2009 the senior leadership team was restructured to reflect a reduction in the number on roll. Three deputy principals, three assistant principals and a business and finance manager support the principal. There has also been an extended period of turbulence which has resulted in a number of staff changes. The academy has had difficulty recruiting suitably qualified and experienced staff in certain subjects such as science.

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

Students' attainment on entry into the academy is exceptionally low. Standards at the end of Year 9 are well below age-related expectations. By the end of Year 11 standards in English and mathematics are well below average. The proportion of students achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, is significantly lower than the national average. However, the academy is working hard to improve students' achievement and at the end of its first year the number of students attaining five GCSE passes at grades A* to C rose by 26 percentage points from the last set of results from the predecessor school. Standards are low because of a legacy of underachievement and a lack of consistently good teaching. However, standards are improving and the rates at which students are making progress are accelerating. In its second year the academy has focused its attention on providing well-targeted interventions which are helping to boost the achievements of those students who are in danger of not meeting their targets. The academy's most recent tracking of information indicates that more students are on course to reach their personal targets. This is because the quality of teaching is improving and interventions are more carefully planned around meeting the needs of individual students. Targets are suitably challenging and used well to raise expectations and drive up standards. The academy's leaders are aware that more needs to be done to improve students' attainment in specific subjects and develop their skills in literacy and numeracy. They have also identified ways to rectify the underachievement of girls, many of whom have low self-esteem and aspirations. In the past a significant proportion of students had poor attitudes to work but more robust systems for engaging them and ensuring high quality behaviour are having a good impact on their learning. Students' learning in lessons is generally good. Their listening skills are also developing well and as students gain more confidence they respond to questions with interest and enthusiasm.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students and staff speak positively about the way in which the academy has improved attitudes to learning, lifted aspirations and students' sense of self-worth, creating a safe and friendly place in which to work. As one student explained to an inspector 'I can now hold my head up high'. Students admit that there are occasional incidents of bullying and anti-social behaviour but they are clear that these are always dealt with swiftly. They understand that they should eat healthy food and there has been an increased uptake of school dinners. They take regular exercise and participation in sports is improving. Students generally enjoy attending the academy and punctuality has greatly improved in the past year because senior leaders are steadily breaking the culture of low attendance. There have been significant improvements and successes with individuals. Although attendance rates are still lower than expected, there is an improving picture. The proportion of persistent absentees has declined and the number of exclusions has been reduced. There has been a very good improvement in students' behaviour. Most students behave well and walk in and around the academy sensibly showing courtesy to others. A very small minority disrupt lessons but these disruptions are dealt with quickly and effectively. Relationships are strong and students trust staff to help and support them. Thorough and robust systems for safeguarding students are in place.

The effectiveness of provision

An accurate picture of strengths and areas for improvement has been achieved by using external assessors who have worked with senior staff to accurately evaluate teaching and learning.

Strengths in teaching include interesting lessons where activities have been well planned and tailored to meet the needs of the students. The pace of lessons is fast and good use is made of questions to move the students on in their learning. Where teaching is good, what students have to learn in lessons is clearly identified and teachers explain what needs to be done to gain the higher grades in examinations. Those students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are taught extremely well because their steps in learning are very well structured and many of the planned activities are practically based. Their emotional, behavioural and learning needs are well known by staff and sensitive support and guidance helps them to grow in confidence. Where learning is less successful teachers have low expectations. They talk for too long and the learning is not made meaningful to the students' everyday experiences.

Teachers' marking of students work varies in quality. Where it is good, for example in English, it clearly comments on what the students have achieved and what they need to do to improve. There are good examples of assessment data being used to

track students' progress well and set clear targets for them. However, this is not a consistent feature throughout the academy and at times insufficient attention is given to helping students take pride in their work.

The curriculum meets the needs of all students. Students in Years 10 and 11 have benefited from the introduction of more vocational courses at the start of this year. In order to make best use of resources, students have been vertically grouped for some subjects in Years 9 and 10. The senior team is measuring the impact of the Year 7 curriculum and the way in which this supports the development of skills in Years 7 to 9. Provision for modern foreign languages is very limited but the uptake is improving in Year 9. Although the academy is working hard to improve literacy skills, access to the curriculum is hindered by poor reading skills and this affects students' overall progress. Students benefit from a good range of extra-curricular activities which enrich their experiences.

The academy's specialism in visual and performing arts is reflected well in the high proportion of students who successfully gain a GCSE in art and design and the high quality work which is displayed around the building. Successful partnerships with neighbouring primary schools have also raised the profile of visual arts within the local community. However, other aspects of the specialism, such as drama and design and technology, are less well developed.

Care, guidance and support for students are an increasing strength of the academy's work. Staff know the students very well and relationships between them are very strong. They work effectively with them to provide good guidance, advice and support. For example, prior to selecting optional subjects in Year 9, the students met employers who advised them on the best routes to take for certain professions. There is effective preventative support work for the most vulnerable students who have social, emotional, learning or behavioural difficulties, in particular, those at risk of exclusion and those making the transition from primary school to the academy. Behaviour has improved significantly because there is rigour in applying the behaviour management strategies. The impact of this work can be seen in the more positive attitudes students have to their work.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The high quality strategic leadership is making a strong impact on the ethos of the academy, the educational provision and students' outcomes. Senior leaders provide clear direction which is based on a secure knowledge of strengths that need to be built on and barriers that require removal. There is a relentless focus on raising standards, improving attendance and maintaining a stable environment. Middle managers are developing into an effective team who have a clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Good work has been done to raise the skill levels of staff in relation to the use of performance data, evaluating and

promoting students' progress and setting challenging targets. Staff express confidence in their senior leaders to guide them in further improvements. Opportunities to engage in valuable in-service training and development activities are welcomed. Students speak positively about the improvements to their learning and are enthusiastic about the changes in and around their school. Governors provide clarity of vision, have clear systems of accountability and very effectively support senior leaders. The academy has a good capacity to continue to improve further.

External support

Senior leaders are making good use of external support from a range of sources. This has provided motivation and developed the skills of senior leaders and middle managers to raise student and teacher expectations and improve standards. The academy benefits from the input of the School Improvement Partner, who has a robust, accurate view of its work and is a good critical friend. The impact of external support shows in the progress that has been made in raising the quality of teaching and learning.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Improve students' reading skills and their access to a wider curriculum by developing a personalised programme for individuals whose reading age is lower than their chronological age.
- Increase the proportion of good and outstanding lessons by increasing the teachers' expectations to provide better challenge, pace of work and level of interest.

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

Yours sincerely

Lorna Brackstone
Her Majesty's Inspector

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