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Mr Stephen Kings
Principal
Merchants' Academy
Gatehouse Avenue
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Dear Mr Kings

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Merchants' Academy.

Introduction

Following my visit with Alison Storey HMI and Jane Neech HMI to your academy on 9 and 10 June 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, vice-principal, other nominated staff, groups of pupils, parents, the chair of the academy board of governors, and several sponsors.

Context

Merchants' Academy opened in new buildings in September 2008, following the closure of Withywood Community School. It is co-sponsored by the Society of Merchant Venturers and the University of Bristol and has a specialism for Enterprise and Skills. The academy is smaller than an average secondary school with 705 students on roll. It serves one of the most deprived areas in the country with almost half of the students eligible for free school meals. About one third of students are

registered as having a special educational need and /or disabilities. The vast majority of students are of White British heritage and there are very few students who use English as an additional language. A new principal was appointed one year prior to the opening of the academy but the majority of staff, including some members of the leadership team, transferred from the predecessor school. A significant minority of teachers left after the first year of opening. However, successful recruitment has ensured that the academy has remained fully staffed. A new principal has been appointed for the next academic year.

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

The academy inherited a history of underachievement from the predecessor school where overall attainment was consistently well below average. However, in its first two years of opening, the academy has made an impact on raising student attainment and the rates of progress are accelerating. Students start the academy with exceptionally low attainment. The academy's tracking systems indicate that students are making good progress in Years 7 and 8 towards meeting personal targets. Although current standards at the end of Year 9 are below age-related expectations, they reflect a good improvement over the two year period since the predecessor school closed. At the end of the academy's first year, the proportion of Year 11 students achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and Mathematics, was significantly lower than the national average but reflected an improvement on attainment at the predecessor school. Current attainment shows that students' achievement has been accelerated. The academy predicts a significant rise in the proportion of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and Mathematics. This is as a direct result of improved attendance and behaviour, and rapid improvements in the quality of teaching. Class sizes have been reduced for literacy and numeracy, and interventions carefully planned around the needs of individual students. Revision sessions are well structured, including a particularly successful residential camp. Close contact with home has ensured that the academy's high expectations are fully understood by parents and carers.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Although attendance rates remain low, there is an improving picture because of the academy's determination to break the culture inherited from the predecessor school. Over half of the students' attendance rates are above the national average but overall statistics are affected by persistent absentees. The academy has successfully introduced a wide range of strategies and, as a consequence, there has been an improvement in the proportion of students who are persistently absent from school.

The school works effectively to avoid exclusion and only two students have been permanently excluded during this academic year. This is a vast improvement on the high numbers excluded at the predecessor school. Students explain that they are far more inclined to attend regularly because they really enjoy their learning and feel

safe. Students appreciate their improved participation in sports which is as a result of better facilities and a wider choice of activities. They understand that the school meals available provide a balanced diet but not all students opt to eat healthily.

Students' behaviour is largely good. They have developed positive attitudes towards their learning at the academy and, as one student explained, 'it is a good place to be'. Many students who were previously disengaged from learning now enjoy their lessons. One student commented that he 'now feels that there are teachers in school who think I am worth teaching'. Students move around the academy sensibly and have developed a good awareness of the needs of others. Bullying has reduced significantly and students feel confident that they can easily access support from staff or peers if any occurs. Students have started to make a strong contribution to the community beyond the school, for example, entertaining senior citizens, producing a short film about the local area, and participating in athletics festivals with nearby primary schools.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors observed 23 lessons selected by the academy. Teaching and learning were good or better in three-quarters of the lessons visited. Six of the lessons observed were of outstanding quality and no inadequate teaching was seen.

Teachers share excellent relationships with their students and set high expectations. They use their good subject knowledge and secure management skills to stimulate and motivate learners. Lesson planning is consistent because teachers use a common framework to plan sessions. The purposes of the lessons are clearly identified and students are given guidance on how to evaluate the success of sessions. High quality questions require students to reflect upon their own learning.

In an outstanding Year 9 food technology lesson the extremely high expectations of health, safety and hygiene, the excellent encouragement for the students to take responsibility for their learning, and the relentless focus on developing key skills for everyday life ensured that they made excellent progress in their learning. In a sixth form biology lesson, learning was moved along at an excellent pace using information and communication technology (ICT) to support learning and excellent questioning skills to challenge the students. The exceptional subject knowledge of the teacher, the very effective teaching strategies deployed and the use of assessment during the lesson played a key role in moving learning forward.

Whole school assessment systems are robust and used well to track the progress of individual students, including those with special educational needs and /or disabilities. Most students' work reflects high quality marking which challenges any poor presentation of work. In the best lessons day to-day assessments are used to gauge progress and inform students of how well they are doing. During these sessions teachers use incisive questioning to test students' knowledge and confirm

that they all fully understand. Students observe others and comment on their work, checking progress against set criteria. Nevertheless, the use of these strategies is variable and is yet to fully embed throughout the academy. Teachers plan lessons which relentlessly focus on raising literacy skills. In a good number of lessons literacy skills were modelled well and key vocabulary was reinforced to improve speaking and spelling skills. However, on occasions the focus on literacy skills detracted from the subject matter of the lesson and was less successful in supporting the students' progress. Occasionally, students who arrived late were not brought up to speed quickly enough and this has a negative impact on their progress.

The academy is developing a curriculum to meet the different needs and interests of all students. The range of vocational and work-related courses has expanded and this suits many of the academy's students, contributing to their improved attendance and greater enjoyment of school. Increasing numbers follow BTEC courses which are resulting in improved results and attainment. The introduction of post-16 curriculum programmes is successfully addressing the need to reduce the number of young people within the local community who previously left the predecessor school with no plans for future education or employment. Courses are tailored to meet individual needs through a range of vocational and academic options. The innovative specialism of 'enterprise and skills' with its strong emphasis on developing different ways to think creatively, reflectively, and with an open mind, is proving effective in ensuring that students are well prepared for the future.

The house system and mixed-age tutor groups, have been successful in making students feel they belong to the whole academy and not just a year group. This structure provides one of many ways in which students receive appropriate support and guidance, both academically and socially. Most students report that this support structure has made them feel more secure and gives them greater confidence because they can provide help and advice to younger peers. Students' views and opinions are voiced through the student parliament. The academy has put in place a range of effective structures to provide additional support. These have had a clear impact on improving attendance, reducing exclusions, and improving the learning of more vulnerable students. Opportunities for individuals to access personalised mentoring from senior leaders is having a positive influence on engaging specific groups of students. The recent appointment of a social worker has already had a significant impact on homophobic behaviour and racism. Since the closure of the predecessor school, considerable improvements have been made in career guidance and this has been instrumental in raising students' aspirations for their future.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The impact of very effective leadership from the principal and his team of senior leaders are reflected in the significant improvements made so far. The principal has

been highly influential in creating an inclusive ethos from which derives a cohesive school that is developing strong local links. He has won the confidence of staff, students and other stakeholders and this has been crucial in taking forward the academy's vision for the future. Senior leaders have had a notable impact on raising the quality of teaching and learning and improving attitudes and behaviour. They provide a clear direction to the academy's work. Very challenging targets have been set to raise attainment and improve attendance. The leadership team demonstrates the capacity to deliver further improvements. Middle leaders are increasingly engaged in the monitoring work of others in their departments and are proud that their opinions are valued and appreciated. Self-evaluation is accurate. The effectiveness of safeguarding procedures has vastly improved since the opening of the academy.

Parental surveys and discussions held with parents indicate that the academy has improved links with parents and carers. On-line reporting, and regular contact with home via telephones and postcards is ensuring that communication with between home and school is a high priority. By sharing facilities and expertise the academy is also working hard to promote partnerships with local primary schools and businesses. Members of the local community comment on how smart the students look in their uniform and report that there have been fewer incidents of anti-social behaviour since the academy opened. This has raised the self esteem of not only the students but of the whole community.

The governing body is particularly well-informed and have an excellent understanding of the role of the academy, its strengths and areas for development. Their analytical focus on raising achievement is very clear and their commitment to the students is unquestionable. For example, governors reward student progress by taking them out for a meal in a top restaurant, to a special football match or on a trip to London. Regular meetings between governors and key staff ensure that the board have a realistic view of the progress being made by the academy. Governors work hard to engage the full support of parents and the local community. With close connections to the world of business and higher education in Bristol, the governors are fully committed to ensuring that the students are well prepared to contribute positively to the local community when they leave school.

External support

External support from sponsors has secured wonderful new facilities of which the students are very proud. Ongoing fund-raising by the sponsors ensures that students have many additional opportunities to develop their enterprise and life skills. For example, a group of students who were successful in their application to attend a residential training course for leadership have cascaded their experiences to their peers. The academy benefits from the input of the School Improvement Partner who is a good critical friend. The academy works in effective partnership with a number of businesses, and with a wide range of organisations and agencies that support

students. It continues to have good relationships with the local authority and recently made use of its advisory service to carry out a review of personal, social and health education.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising attainment.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that the effective and regular use of assessment in lessons is consistently deployed across the academy.
- Ensure that strategies to develop the students' literacy skills enhance learning are integrated smoothly into subject teaching.
- Ensure that students arriving late into lessons are provided with appropriate support so that they can progress at the same rate as their classmates.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Education. 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@dcf.gov.uk]

Once the school has had 24 hours to report any factual inaccuracies, the post-visit letter is copied as appropriate to the following:

- Appropriate authority - chair of governors
- DCSF - Academies Group Paul.hann@dcf.gov.uk

The letters should also be copied electronically to:

paul.brooker@ofsted.gov.uk - the HMI with national responsibility for academies
each member of the inspection team,
the PO for SCC

A copy with editing marked up should be forwarded to the:

- lead HMI