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Mr A Bateman
Principal
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Dear Mr Bateman

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Accrington Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Sue Harrison HMI to your academy on 09 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 and scrutinised documents. They met with the Principal; staff and groups of students; the Chair of the Local Governing Board, who is also a representative of the sponsors; and the Regional Director of the United Learning Trust. There was also a telephone discussion with the School Improvement Partner.

Context

Accrington Academy is an average-sized secondary school and opened in September 2008 on the site of the predecessor school. The academy is a member of the United Learning Trust. The academy has two specialisms: mathematics and sports. It is oversubscribed. The small sixth form started in September 2009. The proportion of students from ethnic minority groups is average, and a higher than average proportion speaks English as an additional language. The proportion of students who

are eligible for free school meals is above average. The proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, including those with a statement of special educational needs, is above average. The Principal was the headteacher at the predecessor school. The vice-principals and most of the staff were also employed at the predecessor school. The academy gained School of Creativity status in 2009. Extension and refurbishment of the building is due for completion in summer 2010. The academy holds the Inclusion Quality Mark, Investors in People and Healthy Schools awards.

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

The proportion of students attaining five GCSEs at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics, is low. The proportion gaining five good GCSEs is average. GCSE results in 2009 on both measures were significantly higher than in the predecessor school. The academy's own data indicate that it is on track to make further improvement in 2010. In 2009 Year 11 students made good progress from a low starting point. They made good progress in English and satisfactory progress in mathematics. Consequently, there is a gap between the results in English and mathematics. The academy has tackled this by constructing a closer working relationship between the English and mathematics departments, focused on the needs of individual students. Students' performance is analysed frequently and in detail, additional support is provided, and teaching is clearly focused on tackling specific weaknesses. As a result, the academy is able to show that the performance gap at GCSE between English and mathematics is closing significantly. Low attainment in science has been tackled by widening the range of science courses, including a vocational course and increasing the uptake of physics, chemistry and biology GCSEs. The academy's assessment data indicate that the proportion of students gaining two science GCSEs at grades A* to C is set to increase in 2010.

In 2009, at Key Stage 3, students underachieved in mathematics due to lack of specialist teaching. As a result of improved staffing, Year 9 students have made significantly improved progress in mathematics in 2010. A significant proportion of students, especially in Year 7, have low levels of literacy and numeracy. The academy has acted energetically to meet their needs with new programmes of support. The academy has an imaginative and engaging approach to training staff to develop students' literacy better and to promoting literacy in families. Plans are in place to evaluate the impact of these new strategies.

Students enjoy their learning more due to the higher standards of discipline and the higher expectations of what they can achieve. They are motivated by the wide range of curriculum experiences on offer. They value the increased opportunities to gain early accreditation. Frequent and more rapid feedback on their progress encourages students to work harder. They enjoy the extensive opportunities to use information and communication technology (ICT). They are developing teamwork skills in a wide variety of contexts. Those with social and emotional barriers to learning are

receiving well-targeted support to improve their engagement and personal development. A few students become distracted when teaching is less than good quality.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Attendance has improved significantly and is now above average. Behaviour has also improved. Students understand the standards that are expected of them and are positive about the calmer atmosphere since the school became an academy. The majority of students are polite and helpful to staff, visitors and other students. As academy ambassadors and school councillors students contribute well to school life. They are increasingly involved in decision making, for example, by contributing their views about teaching and learning. They contribute well to the wider community and benefit from engaging with the wider world. For example, students are involved in the production of training videos with external agencies, the Accrington literacy festival and work with primary schools. Sixth form students run popular activities for younger students, such as music and film clubs. Students participate well in sports, arts and a wide range of other enrichment activities. The proportion of students who stay on in education, training or employment is now higher than average as a result of the effectiveness of curriculum provision and individual guidance.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching and the use of assessment have improved as a result of actions to strengthen teaching in the core subjects and by widening the range of strategies used by all teachers. A wide range of information and media technology is used well to stimulate learning and inform assessment. Work with creative artists has enabled staff to increase their expertise and develop their use of resources. Collaboration between departments has helped to extend the variety of learning activities. Performance management is used effectively to ensure the widespread use of literacy activities. In the best lessons ground rules are clear and the teaching communicates high expectations. Work is carefully planned to enable students to work independently on a challenging variety of tasks in which they contribute their own ideas. Teachers provide clear and expert explanations which help understanding. Effective classroom dialogue encourages participation and helps to connect ideas. On occasion, teachers move on without checking understanding or taking the opportunity to develop an idea. In a few lessons there is a little low-level disruption where the purpose of the activity is not clear, group work is not organised effectively, expectations are not high enough or there is too much talk by the teacher. There are good examples of teachers using ICT to assess students' learning during a lesson and of students using different ways to assess their own or each other's work. Students know their levels and whether they are on track to meet their targets. The degree to which they use information about how to improve their learning is too variable. In some subjects students know specifically what they need

to do to improve; in others, they are vague. The academy has recognised the need to improve the consistency in the use of assessment to improve learning.

The curriculum is being developed well to meet needs of different groups of students. In Years 7 and 8 a well-founded emphasis on developing the core competences underpins all learning. The academy makes good use of its sports specialism and its School of Creativity status to enhance the curriculum and make learning meaningful. Cross-curriculum projects involving external expertise successfully engage students' interests, develop their skills and enhance community links. The academy's strategy for developing literacy skills is becoming increasingly effective. Numeracy across the curriculum is underdeveloped and this is now being addressed, for example through work with a local art gallery on geometric shapes.

The academy offers a good range of academic and vocational courses to meet the needs of all students. Partnership work with other providers is strong. The academy is the lead school for the creative and media diploma and for the forthcoming sports diploma. Students have increasing opportunities to take qualifications early, where appropriate. Students in the new sixth form are taking an appropriate range of academic and vocational courses at A and AS level. There are plans to extend this curriculum next year. Enrichment activities are a strong feature of the academy including in the sixth form. Students benefit from numerous trips in this country and abroad. Significant numbers attend the large range of after-school clubs. Targeted enrichment activities meet the needs of specific groups of students including those at risk of becoming disaffected. The grouping of students in mixed-age groups for form time is popular with students of all ages. Younger students learn from and are helped by older students and relationships are stronger across age groups. They also like the competition between college groups in team events and for attendance and behaviour rewards.

The academy has strengthened its systems for care, guidance and support. Rigorous and effective monitoring systems promote good attendance. Effective analysis and action has reduced the proportion of persistent absentees. Clear systems to manage behaviour are underpinned by effective staff training. Links with parents and carers have improved and this is helping to develop shared expectations of attendance and behaviour. Effective tracking systems identify students in danger of falling behind with work and a wide range of measures provide additional support. There is good support for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and for students requiring language support. Arrangements to help students make choices on course options are effective. The academy is proactive in working with external agencies, and is employing more specialist staff, to support young people whose circumstances make them vulnerable. Safeguarding procedures are rigorous and all staff have received appropriate training.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The Principal and his senior team have effectively brought about improvements in achievement, attendance and behaviour. High expectations have been set for staff and students. The ethos of the academy is positive and promotes ambition. The governing body has a high level of expertise and a strong commitment to raising achievement and aspiration in the local community. It has a good understanding of the academy's strengths and weaknesses and actively provides support and challenge.

A new leadership structure and stronger systems of accountability between senior and middle leaders have contributed to a more robust approach to improving students' performance. Action plans are clearly focused and frequently monitored. Evidence of actions is gathered systematically at senior and middle leadership levels. The academy has clear evidence of the effective progress it has made in implementing its plans. Self-evaluation is well planned, highly systematic and strongly informed by data analysis and the use of ICT. Regular and focused lesson observations provide a full picture of strengths and areas for development in teaching and the use of assessment. The academy has begun to develop the role of students in contributing to lesson observation.

Target setting and progress monitoring are being used with increasing effectiveness to identify underperformance and to prompt personalised intervention. Effective action has been taken to improve the quality of middle leaders and to tackle weaknesses in teaching. Progress has been made in increasing the proportion of good rather than satisfactory teaching, and this remains an area for further improvement. Some middle leaders are new to their positions of responsibility and are in the process of consolidating their skills and confidence. The sports specialism has contributed to curriculum development through a variety of imaginative projects supported by the School of Creativity status. The specialism in mathematics is at an early stage of development.

External support

The United Learning Trust provides regular support and challenge to the Principal and senior leadership team which is supplemented by the monitoring provided by the School Improvement Partner. The academy has received good support from local training providers in developing the vocational curriculum. The academy makes a strong contribution to the 14–16 curriculum partnership between local secondary schools and cooperates effectively in managing exclusions across local schools. Local state and independent schools and a school in the United Learning Trust have made valuable contributions to the development of sixth form courses and provision for gifted and talented students. The curriculum and teaching have benefited from the

expertise brought by creative practitioners through the Creative Partnerships scheme.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment further, especially in English, mathematics and science, by ensuring that:
 - early intervention is effective in improving the literacy and numeracy skills of students with low basic skills
 - teaching and the use of assessment are consistently good
 - middle leaders consistently bring about measured improvements in the progress made by students.
- Develop the breadth and quality of sixth form provision.

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

Bernard Campbell
Her Majesty's Inspector

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