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Mr Steve Hawke
Principal
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Dear Mr Hawke

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Abraham Darby Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Mark Sims HMI to your academy on 11 and 12 May 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, held discussions with and worked alongside senior and middle leaders, held a telephone conversation with the Chair of Governors, met with the headteacher of the federation partner school, and held discussions with three panels of students.

Context

The academy opened in September 2008 on the same site as Abraham Darby Specialist School for the Performing Arts, the predecessor school. The academy has

specialisms in the performing arts, which continued from the predecessor school, and business. The Principal took up post in September 2008. Two vice-principals, along with the great majority of teachers, were transferred from the predecessor school. A third vice-principal was appointed in January 2009, and a new head of mathematics joined the academy in September 2009 along with 14 other teachers. The heads of English and mathematics have been promoted as assistant vice-principals, to strengthen the senior leadership team and give greater prominence to these core subjects. Approximately a quarter of staff are new to the academy since it opened.

The academy is sponsored by The Worshipful Company of Haberdashers, in partnership with Telford and Wrekin local authority. It is also part of a federation with Adams' Grammar School in Newport, Shropshire. Contractual arrangements for new academy buildings have recently concluded successfully. Contractors have moved onto the site to begin groundwork for the new campus, adjacent to the current buildings, with a projected completion date of September 2011.

The academy has 739 students currently on roll. This includes 33 students in Year 12, as the first year of the sixth form which opened in September 2009. Of the other year groups, the current Year 9 is small with just under 100 students. However, the academy's roll is now increasing. Both the current Year 7 and the new September 2010 intake are oversubscribed. Similarly, while students' attainment on entry has been firmly below average, the prior attainment of the current Year 7 is broadly average. The great majority of students are of White British heritage and almost all speak English as their first language. The proportion known to be eligible for free school meals is twice the national average, reflecting some of the challenges faced in the academy's immediate locality. Overall, the proportion of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is average, although the number of students with statements of special educational need is slightly higher than average.

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

The academy published its first examination results in 2009. The proportion of students gaining five or more good passes in GCSE or equivalent qualifications showed, at 64%, a significant increase on those achieved by the predecessor school in 2008. The proportion gaining five good passes including English and mathematics, showed a modest improvement to 38%; however, in this and other key measures, standards attained by students remained significantly below those achieved nationally. While these results represented broadly satisfactory progress for the year group as a whole, given their starting points, the lowest attaining boys made much less progress

than should have been expected. Progress in mathematics was poor across the year group.

The attainment and progress of current students is tracked rigorously. This tracking indicates that there will be further improvement in headline results at GCSE this year. It is commendable that teachers are giving time and support beyond timetabled lessons to provide additional revision and catch-up sessions, including holiday study programmes, to promote this improvement. Early entry of all Year 11 students for the GCSE papers in English and mathematics has resulted in a third of the year group already achieving a grade C or above in both subjects. Inspection evidence showed that students throughout the academy are making satisfactory progress. Students are making better progress in mathematics than they did in 2009, but standards of literacy across the curriculum are variable. Although there are some notable and effective examples of students being challenged appropriately when written work is poorly presented or contains weak spelling, punctuation and grammar, this is by no means consistent.

Although sixth-form students have yet to complete the first year of their studies, the academy's monitoring systems suggest that they are on track to meet or exceed their targets in two thirds of their courses.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

There is no doubt that, since the academy opened, there have been improvements in students' behaviour. Staff, students, parents, and visitors all comment favourably on the much more positive ethos that has developed since September 2008. Students wear their smart new uniform with pride. During their visit, inspectors were struck by the good working relationships that they saw in most classrooms and by the orderly atmosphere around the academy generally. They were impressed by the polite and welcoming attitudes shown to them by students of all ages, and particularly by the articulate maturity of good-humoured discussions with older students. This attitude does these students great credit and is a direct result of the strong, principled expectations of the Principal and the staff, underpinned by the distinctive Haberdashers' ethos. The number of exclusions for inappropriate behaviour was extremely high in the academy's first year, with the Principal understandably taking what one student described as a 'zero-tolerance' approach to poor conduct. Exclusions have fallen significantly since September 2009. There are still occasions when low-level chatter and rarer instances of inappropriate calling out inhibit teaching and learning. The Principal has made it very clear that such behaviour is not acceptable;

nevertheless, the academy recognises that the number of incidents that require temporary exclusion is still too high.

Overall, attendance appears broadly in line with the national figures although there are noticeable differences between year groups. Year 11 attendance is still too low. Overall levels of persistent absence have improved, but remain above the national average. Securing regular attendance for all students remains important to raising standards further.

One aspect of the academy's work that is spoken of extremely highly by students is the range of opportunities available outside the formal curriculum including in the performing arts. Musical ensembles are of particularly high quality, and performing music to such a high standard gives a huge boost to the self-esteem of participating students and the academy as a whole.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors visited 34 lessons. They found some significant strengths, including the planning of clear objectives and a good willingness on the part of students to participate in activities and tackle the work set by their teachers. Teachers generally make good use of the academy's tracking systems to record students' progress. However, there is much more limited use of this information by teachers to plan lessons that target the needs of students working at different levels by providing them with tasks of differing complexity. Too many lessons have a whole-class focus and do not include opportunities for the more-able students to press ahead with more complex tasks or for the less-able to take more time to improve the quality of their learning. Too often, the emphasis is on simply completing a task or activity, rather than completing it to a specified standard. Similarly, while there are some notably good examples of marking – including in English and mathematics – not enough use is made of written assessment to help students improve the quality of their work. Consequently, while most students know what levels or grades they are working at or aiming for, far fewer are able to say specifically what they have to do to achieve a higher standard.

In the first year of the sixth form, the academy has worked hard to facilitate a varied range of options for students. At present most of these are A-Level courses and, so that the sixth form is able to benefit from a greater range of interests and abilities, the academy has identified that a key area for development is to explore further widening of the curriculum offer. Partnerships with the federation school have helped to support teachers as they have prepared to teach new courses, as well as providing some

shared teaching. These are early days, though, and the academy recognises that there is more to do to ensure that all staff are equally well-prepared for sixth-form teaching. Robust monitoring systems have been put in place to monitor students' progress, although the students do not always understand the purpose of these processes or the targets that have been set for them.

While there are arrangements in place for providing adequate programmes of personal and social education, the academy has recognised that these, along with the citizenship curriculum, require refocusing. A revised programme is planned for September 2010, to include aspects of economic and enterprise education. A new business education course has been introduced as a core entitlement in Key Stage 4, but again the academy knows that there is more work to be done to fully reflect the business specialism across the curriculum. A greater range of alternative qualifications is now offered, and this is helping students to achieve higher numbers of good passes in Year 11. The small size of the current Year 9 cohort has restricted the options available although the academy has endeavoured, in partnership with parents and other providers, to offer appropriate curriculum programmes for these students. Rising numbers now opting to join the academy have enabled additional staff appointments to be made.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The transition development plan, for the years from 2008 to 2010, had a strong focus on creating a distinctive culture for the academy based on the Haberdashers' ethos including high expectations for behaviour and conduct. Under the strong, positive leadership of the Principal, this transition plan has been achieved successfully. There is no doubt that conditions for teaching and learning have improved significantly since the academy was opened, and aspirations are high. The new development plan, for 2010 to 2013, rightly places raising students' attainment as its first and central priority. The academy recognises that this was not the case with the transition development plan and that the new development plan, which is still in the early draft stages, requires much more detail including clear targets and outcomes that can be evaluated. One extremely positive aspect of the new development plan is that the management of the new building project has been disaggregated from the leadership team's focus on raising attainment. The governing body and sponsors are, quite rightly, taking steps to ensure that the Principal and the senior team are able to focus on the core business of educating students currently at the school while building work takes place.

The Principal has built a good sense of purpose amongst the senior team and the staff as a whole. There are regular, purposeful line-management meetings and middle managers support colleagues through regular 'learning walks'. There are some real strengths amongst middle managers, although this is not yet consistent across all subjects. Nevertheless, there are sound systems in place for monitoring the work of departments, including appropriate subject self-evaluation and development planning. These feed into the academy's main self-evaluation which, while occasionally over-generous with its assessment of the outcomes achieved by students thus far, nevertheless promotes the senior leaders' and sponsors' high ambition and understanding of what needs to be done to fulfil that ambition. Inspectors have confidence in the academy's good capacity to build on and sustain the progress since September 2008 and to further improve outcomes for students, particularly because of the work that has been done to promote a positive ethos and purposeful learning environment.

External support

Both the Haberdashers' ethos and the federation partnership with Adams' Grammar School are now firmly established and have had a demonstrably beneficial effect on improving provision and outcomes for students. As a Creative Partnerships 'Change School', the academy has also benefited from the work of a creative agent, who has helped to broker a range of interesting cross- and extra-curricular learning opportunities.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise students' achievement further by
 - bringing all measures of standards achieved in Year 11 in line with national averages, including in English and mathematics
 - ensuring that there is consistent focus on high standards of literacy across all areas of the curriculum

- Promote more effective teaching by

- ensuring that marking provides helpful guidance to students about how they can improve the quality of their work
 - using the academy’s tracking and knowledge of students’ needs to plan lessons that provide appropriate challenge and support for all abilities
- Further improve students’ preparation for learning by
- bringing levels of persistent absence down to at least the national average and particularly improving the attendance of Year 11 students
 - continuing to reduce instances of poor behaviour that requires temporary exclusion, and developing teaching strategies to eliminate low-level misbehaviour in lessons
- Identify where improvements can be made in the sixth form by
- providing more intensive support for teachers introducing new courses
 - widening the range of courses available to ensure increased engagement and participation of students
 - developing assessment procedures so that students have a better understanding of the progress they have made and their potential.

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

Mark Phillips
Her Majesty’s Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
the Academies Group, DFE [Paul.hann@dcscf.gsi.gov.uk]

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