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Mr John Sheppard
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Dear Mr Sheppard

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Hereford Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Charalambos Loizou HMI, to Hereford Academy on 22–23 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, nominated staff, groups of students and a representative of the governing body. They spoke with the academy's national challenge adviser, who is also the school improvement partner, on the telephone. However, the academy sponsors, the Hereford Diocesan Board of Education did not respond to an invitation to meet inspectors. No representative from the Department for Education attended the final feedback meeting. Inspectors checked the single central record and noted that procedures met current government guidance.

Context

The academy opened in September 2008 and the headteacher of the predecessor school became principal. A significant proportion of the staff of the predecessor school transferred to the academy at that time. In the last eighteen months the academy has made a number of significant and successful appointments. Effective heads of department have improved provision in science, English, design technology and music. New directors of learning have accepted responsibility for



mathematics and science, English and languages, the curriculum and the monitoring of teaching.

The academy is smaller than secondary schools nationally and draws students from the south of the city and the surrounding area. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is in line with the national average, although on a rising trend. The number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is a quarter of the national figure and the proportion of those who speak English as an additional language is low.

The proportion of students registered by the academy as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above the national figure, as is the proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs. There are a small number of children in the academy who are looked after by the local authority.

The academy has specialisms in science, sport and health; it has also received national accreditations in Investors in People, ECM Mark – Gold standard and the NAPTA award for inclusive staff development. The academy is sponsored by the Bishop of Hereford through the Diocesan Board of Education.

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

Attainment on entry to the academy and its predecessor school has been below average for the last 5 years. However, the progress made by students has risen steadily for the last 4 years and in 2009 was amongst the top 4% of schools nationally.

The pattern of examination success at GCSE and in a range of vocational qualifications continues to vary. In 2009, the proportion of students who gained five higher grade GCSEs, 85%, was significantly above the national average; an improvement of 34 percentage points in the last 3 years. However, the proportion of students securing five higher grade GCSEs including English and mathematics, 25%, is below the government's minimum target for secondary schools. The proportion of students securing five higher grade GCSE including functional English and mathematics is well below the national figure.

Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities make good progress in a range of subjects. There are few students from ethnic minority backgrounds and they are at least as successful as their White British peers.

Although a trend of improvement was secured by the predecessor school in 2007-8, key weaknesses remained within the 2009 GCSE results in English and mathematics. A scrutiny of the academy's robust assessment data base, including marks already awarded by the examination boards suggest that GCSE results in the core subjects will be stronger in 2010.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

There are consistent procedures in place to monitor and follow up student absence. Attendance is currently in line with the national average. Effective steps have been taken to improve students' punctuality. There is still more to do to reduce persistent absenteeism and the academy has rightly prioritised this as an area for improvement. Students welcome new initiatives, including opportunities to bank reward points for good behaviour, attendance and punctuality.

Students are usually well behaved in lessons and at other times, including break-times, although this varies depending on the quality of teaching and support provided in lessons. Students are often enthusiastic learners who, when the opportunity is provided, thrive on the challenges presented when staff are effective in supporting and responding to their needs. Vulnerable students often have productive relationships with their learning support workers. In the most effective lessons, relationships are strong and students feel more confident to offer ideas and improve their progress and performance. In some lessons, students become restless or disengaged because the teaching is not sufficiently challenging or engaging.

Students trust that the staff will act on their views and feel there have been significant improvements introduced by the Principal and leadership team. Teachers and support staff have good relationships with the students, who say they enjoy the academy and feel safe. Improvements in teaching have enabled students to be more involved and interested in their lessons. As a result, they are becoming more aspirational in their outlook when choosing options and further pathways, as they move up the academy. Students continue to enjoy their sporting and other activities and are very appreciative of the additional time the staff give them at the end of the working day, during visits, special events and celebrations.

The effectiveness of provision

Inspectors visited 34 lessons, just over half of which were judged to be good or better; one lesson was judged inadequate. Good or better teaching was seen in English, mathematics and the academy specialisms of science, sport and health.



Most lessons observed were good or satisfactory and students are provided with good opportunities to reflect and assess their own learning. There is scope to improve the pace of learning and the expectations set by some staff. In the most effective lessons, students are more involved and engaged because teachers and support staff listen to them and offer appropriate challenge. Students often benefit from opportunities to reflect on their own learning and share ideas, which improves their ability to listen and respect other points of view. There are good opportunities for students to apply core skills such as independent writing, although some lessons do not provide enough resources to give students confidence to write more extensively

Two quite different lessons were judged to be outstanding. In a Year 10 science lesson where students were revising electromagnetic waves the relentless pace, well-chosen resources and incisive questioning clarified misconceptions and provoked the students' curiosity; this in turn generated student debate. In a Year 8 music lesson on notation, students learned to analyse patterns of sound, read and perform a simplified musical score and finally, how to compose their own piece. All of the planned learning was drawn from the students' responses; pace and challenge generated engagement.

Teachers often make good use of the wealth of assessment information and tasks regularly build on previous learning. The most effective lessons tailor activities to hold students' interests and focus on specific learning outcomes. This was evident in a mathematics lesson when Year 9 students successfully explored different methods of calculating probability. The teacher responded sensitively to the students' different levels of understanding and capabilities. However, the work provided in some lessons is not tailored closely enough to the needs of all students. This in turn slows learning and limits opportunities for students to explore further or extend their knowledge and understanding. Where tasks were allocated too much time, or students were allowed to set the pace of their own learning, engagement declined.

The impact of regular monitoring and a focus on improving teachers' planning has sharpened the way assessment is used to accelerate the learning of those who are falling behind or start from a low baseline on entry.

The staff have worked hard to improve the accuracy of teachers' assessments. Consequently, teachers have a greater understanding of students' capabilities, what they need to learn next and, in some cases, the confidence to amend their planning. Despite these improvements, there is still scope to develop the teaching further. One common weakness is the missed opportunity to provide the right level of challenge or extend the learning of students when they are working independently. An



inappropriate match of task to the students' learning needs was evident on a number of occasions when students were asked to work independently. In addition, the expectations set in some lessons are sometimes too low so that behaviour deteriorates or affects the learning of others.

The pastoral care provided for students is strong; staff are responsive to students' needs or concerns. Learning support workers provide additional help and make a valuable and effective contribution to students who find learning difficult, including students with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The academy maintains an ethos of care and respect for all and students are provided with a range of responsibilities that enable them to contribute to the academy and the local community. In addition to the opportunities provided for the student union to represent the views of all students, initiatives, such as the use of ambassadors, mentors and buddies enable students to feel valued, safe and part of the academy community. As one commented, 'This academy has improved immensely and is making a real difference to me and to the community.'

The curriculum offered is effectively tailored to the students' learning needs. It has been important to provide a range of courses across which students can be successful and this has been well-managed by the senior team and heads of department. An example of where curriculum change has had the greatest impact on standards and achievement is in science. The range of vocational and GCSE qualifications available has improved the proportion of students securing a higher level GCSE to 96%; an improvement of 20 percentage points in the last academic year. The combination of single subject sciences with double entry traditional courses and applied science vocational GCSE has been effective and provides significant opportunities for further development.

The introduction of Btec courses into Year 9 has been well-managed. The freedom to provide a range of vocational courses created by the changes to Key Stage 3 has, for example, allowed the ASDAN programme to be expanded appropriately. Senior staff are rightly considering the need to grow the students' learning skills through a range of level 1 and 2 vocational qualifications in Years 8-12.

Post 16 provision is relatively small currently; however, students make satisfactory or good progress as a result of the appropriate curriculum provision and effective care and guidance.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The leadership of the Principal has been the key to the progress made since the academy opened. Good strategic decisions have been made to reinvigorate the



leadership team and this has embedded ambition and driven improvement. The leadership team is both hard working and reflective, demonstrating an increasing ability to bring pedagogical insights to the enhancement of provision.

Senior staff were invited to join inspectors as part of the extensive programme of joint observation of teaching and learning. The views expressed by senior colleagues during a formal review of this exercise concurred with the judgements given by HMI.

The governing body is well-informed and its focus on raising standards and achievement is clear. The drive displayed by leaders and governors to ensure that the academy building programme is completed to the highest possible standard, on time and on budget is important. However, some further delegation of responsibility to middle managers is required to control the work load and complexities of commissioning the new premises.

External support

The principal and other senior staff spoke well of the support received from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust advisers notably with developments related to the middle leadership programme and in securing the support of commercial consultants for the leadership team and the development of information and communication technology.

The external support provided by the School Improvement Partner who is also the National Challenge Adviser has been useful in some areas; however, the 2009 examination outcomes do not support his overly positive evaluation of standards.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Refine the Year 8 to Year 12 curriculum provision to develop the students' learning skills and enhance progression.
- Raise standards in English and mathematics

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, Diocesan Board of Education, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the Department for Education This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely



David Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector

