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27 May 2010

Mr Michael Griffiths
Principal
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Dear Mr Griffiths

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Samworth Church Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Paul Brooker HMI to Samworth Church Academy on 25–26 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 and met with the principal, senior and middle leaders, nominated staff, groups of pupils and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

The Samworth Church Academy opened in September 2008. The academy is sponsored jointly by David Samworth and the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. The academy's specialism is in business and enterprise. Pupils are allocated to one of the five schools within the academy. The senior leaders of these schools are responsible for specific aspects of provision and performance, and for the care, guidance and support of the pupils within them. The five schools are supported by the academy achievement services that are responsible for the welfare of different groups of pupils.

Since the academy opened, two senior leaders have left; one appointment was made last year and another will be made in September to replace them. The

academy has recruited a number of staff to replace those leaving at the end of this term. Pupil admissions have risen in Years 7 and 12 and the academy is looking forward to moving into its new buildings in July 2010.

The academy is smaller than average with 780 pupils on roll including 98 in the sixth form, but growing in size because of its increasing popularity in the community. Attainment on entry to Year 7 is well below average in most years. The proportions of pupils who are eligible for free school meals and who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is larger than average. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups or who come from homes where English is not the first language is below average.

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

Pupils and students report how much they enjoy their lessons and appreciate the improvements to their learning that are being made. Progress is accelerating as a result of improvements to teaching and other provision. In 2009 examination results show that attainment overall at the end of Key Stage 4 improved slightly. However, the standards reached by pupils at GCSE in 2009 were significantly below average. This resulted from a legacy of underachievement that the academy was unable to overcome when these pupils were in Year 11. The proportion of pupils gaining at least five GCSEs at grade C or above including English and mathematics was significantly below average. This is because attainment in English and mathematics was low. Current academy assessment information and the results of GCSEs taken by pupils earlier this year show a considerable improvement in the attainment of Year 11 pupils so that the gap between their standards and the national average is narrowing. In mathematics in particular, attainment is improving considerably as a result of strengthening provision.

In 2009, results show that standards in the sixth form at both AS level and A level were significantly below average. The standards of these students were below average on entry and the academy has rightly identified that the progress made by students in the sixth form was inadequate. Current rates of progress made by students are better than last year, but satisfactory teaching is not sufficiently accelerating students' progress and raising attainment in the sixth form.

Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities made considerably less progress than their peers in 2009. This year there is clear evidence of improvement in their achievement so that their predicted outcomes are higher. However, the academy has not been sufficiently rigorous in its analysis of data about these precise groups in order to evaluate their participation in academy life and performance across the curriculum. Consequently, pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are not making the progress they could, because the provision is not sufficiently tailored to meet the needs of many of them.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The academy has strengthened the pupils' personal development. The most significant improvements have been in their behaviour, attendance and punctuality and the extent to which they are prepared for the next stage of their education and later life. Pupils feel safe, and are developing healthy lifestyles and the contribution they make to the community is strengthening. This is due in part to the considerable increase in the enrichment and enterprise opportunities provided by the academy.

Steps taken by the academy to improve attendance have been successful so that the low attendance of last year has risen and is now much closer to the national average. The behaviour of the pupils has improved considerably. As one pupil reported, 'The academy runs much more smoothly and there is no disruption.' Improvements to pupils' spiritual, moral and social development underpin the increasing respect for, and pride in, the academy. In lessons pupils are generally well-behaved, but there are insufficient opportunities provided for them to further develop their independence and personal study skills. Consequently, pupils are unable to demonstrate a greater responsibility for their own learning and progress. In the academy's first year the exclusion rate was very high. This has reduced this year, but it is still high and, in particular, the large proportion of pupils excluded who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is a concern.

The effectiveness of provision

Teaching has improved since the academy opened. Academy leaders have ensured a greater consistency in the quality of lessons. For example, planning has improved and pupils are made aware of the intentions of the lesson because learning objectives and their outcomes are routinely explained to them. Nearly all lessons are characterised by mutual respect between pupils and adults. Pupils are generally cooperative and work hard. Teachers use assessment information effectively to group pupils by ability and to identify those who would benefit from extra help. They are less successful at using the information they have to pitch work specifically so that it meets the needs of all pupils. This is particularly the case for some pupils with special educational needs and also for the more able who are not always sufficiently challenged by their work. In the lessons that are satisfactory, pupils are well behaved and make satisfactory progress. Their progress is no faster because in some lessons teachers do not fully engage the pupils, nor do they give them sufficient opportunity to take the responsibility to improve their work. When this happens only a few pupils become involved in answering questions and they are over reliant on the teacher to direct their learning. In the smaller proportion of lessons that are good or outstanding this is not the case. For example, in a good history lesson, pupils were involved practically in carefully prepared activities that enabled them to develop their understanding of the changing attitude of Americans to the plight of the Plains Indians following the Battle of the Little Big Horn. They were then well prepared to articulate some insightful answers to the questions posed by the teacher.

A strengthening curriculum and care of pupils, particularly with regard to their safety and well-being, has resulted in improvements in outcomes. The academy's specialism is starting to make a stronger contribution to this with the widening range of opportunities on offer to pupils to demonstrate their enterprise skills.

Outcomes in the sixth form have not improved significantly since the academy opened. This is because provision is weaker than in the rest of the academy. Monitoring and evaluation by the academy identified this and, in particular, rightly recognised that teaching was too didactic. Students were not engaged sufficiently in the lessons, nor were they developing essential study skills. Staff training to overcome this took place earlier this year, but evidence from observations in lessons indicates that the academy has made little progress to strengthen sixth form teaching. The use of assessment information to advise students on the steps they need to take to improve their work in order to meet their target grades is weak. Consequently, students are not encouraged to develop as independent learners and too many readily admit that they do not work, are unclear how target grades are derived and are not confident that they will achieve these.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The principal and other leaders have achieved real success in establishing a safe, calm and positive climate for learning where pupils enjoy coming to the academy, value the many new opportunities offered and demonstrate considerable pride and respect for the academy. The principal provides effective leadership and is well supported by the staff and governors. Leadership has strengthened considerably at all levels resulting in the important improvements that have been made. One reason that the environment has improved so much is because of the successful work of the senior leaders to raise the morale of the staff. In 2008 staff attendance was a concern. This is no longer the case and they demonstrate a shared common purpose and determination to improve the education of the pupils. One of the benefits of this has been the rise in the number of admission applications this year as the local community gains respect for the work of the academy.

Procedures for monitoring and evaluating the work of the academy have successfully led to the improvements in provision. In the sixth form and for some groups of pupils, senior and middle leaders have been less successful in using the assessment and other information they possess about the academy to make the necessary improvements in provision. Middle leaders have made some effective improvements to provision that are leading to higher standards; for example, the improvements to provision in mathematics are resulting in a rise in attainment at Key Stage 4. They correctly recognise that more attention to improving the quality of teaching further is necessary for progress to accelerate more rapidly.

The governing body has a clear vision for the future of the academy and a growing understanding of its work so that it can challenge academy leaders effectively. Governors rightly recognise that some procedures to hold the academy to account for its work need developing further.

External support

The academy has found the support of the School Improvement Partner particularly useful in rigorously challenging it to make the necessary improvements. Her analyses of the academy's progress have been accurate in identifying the academy's strengths and weaknesses and helpful in identifying the steps that need to be taken for continued development.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Strengthen outcomes in the sixth form by eradicating underachievement and ensuring that teaching, the curriculum and the support and academic guidance are of the highest quality.
- Strengthen the performance and participation in the life of the academy of groups of pupils, and in particular, those with special educational needs and/or disabilities by undertaking more rigorous analysis of data about precise groups in order better to tailor the provision to meet their needs.
- Ensure that leaders and managers at all levels drive and secure improvement in teaching to engage pupils more effectively in their learning, foster independence and pitch work more accurately so that it meets the needs of all groups.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Group at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tim Bristow
Her Majesty's Inspector