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20 May 2010

Mrs Vanessa Ray
Principal
Westlakes Academy
Main Street
Egremont
Cumbria
CA22 2DQ

Dear Mrs Ray,

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to West Lakes Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Anthony Briggs, additional inspector, to your academy on 19 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 second monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal and other nominated staff, the Chair of the Governing Body, the School Improvement Partner and the National Leader of Education who is working with the academy.

Context

The academy leadership group (ALG) has experienced further change since the last monitoring visit. An experienced senior leader stepped in to cover for the Acting Principal during her absence due to ill-health. A Director of Learning left the academy in December. A new substantive Principal has been appointed who took up her post at the start of the summer term. In response to staffing changes, the academy has been successful in making a number of appointments including two new vice- principals to the ALG and a new head of post-16. A human resources



manager has also been appointed to take responsibility for statutory safeguarding procedures as part of her role. The academy continues to experience difficulty in recruiting a suitably qualified teacher to lead the mathematics department. Following the resignation of the Chair of the Governing Body, a new chair who also represents one of the sponsors, was appointed from within the governing body one week before the monitoring visit. An Associate Principal, commissioned by the Acting Principal, has been working with senior leaders since November 2009. The academy has been partnered with a National Support School in York and the headteacher who is a National Leader of Education has been working with senior leaders, governors and the sponsors since January.

Provision for sixth-form students was transferred to another site for a period of three weeks during the spring term. This was as a result of health and safety concerns identified by leaders relating to existing accommodation that have now been resolved.

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

Students' achievement and attainment were reported on in detail following the last monitoring visit. A raising attainment plan, using funds made available as part of the National Challenge Initiative, has targeted strategies effectively to close gaps in students' prior learning. While academy leaders are aware that further improvement is required to enable challenging targets to be met, students' attainment is beginning to rise. Already, 52% of students in Year 11 have attained a GCSE pass at grade C or above in English language which represents a significant improvement on results in 2009. A similar trend of improvement is evident in the results of GCSE modules taken in mathematics.

Assessment information and lesson observations indicate that the rate of students' progress is increasing. In lessons, the pace of learning is accelerating because of improved planning that is matched better to individual needs. However, higher attaining students do not all make the progress they might because activities do not always provide sufficient challenge to extend their learning.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Other relevant outcomes for students were not a focus of this monitoring visit. However, behaviour observed in lessons was usually good and reflected warm working relationships between staff and students. Attitudes to learning were generally positive, especially where teaching engaged students actively in their learning. However, students become passive recipients of learning where they are not challenged sufficiently or where teacher-led activities dominate the lesson. Occasionally, they lose interest where activities do not match their learning needs.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is improving. A more consistent approach to planning has been established that focuses on what students will learn and how teachers will support learning based on information about students' prior attainment. Planning incorporates more opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and regular checks by teachers to assess the progress being made towards shared learning objectives. However, teachers are not always confident to adapt plans as learning proceeds to ensure that all students make the progress they might. In the best lessons observed, good opportunities were provided for students to participate in group and paired activities that were tailored to solve problems or deepen their understanding of assessment criteria in preparation for forthcoming examinations. Questioning was used effectively to test students' understanding and reinforce key learning points. However, opportunities were occasionally missed to probe more deeply to extend students' learning further.

Teachers have benefited from an ongoing programme of professional development that involves a combination of external support and in-house expertise. Good practice is also shared routinely through the 'Learning Group' to extend the range of teaching strategies used to accelerate progress.

The contribution made by subject specialisms to the curriculum is currently under review as part of plans to adapt provision in order to meet the needs of all groups of students more effectively. Sixth-form provision has already been extended for September 2009 in order to reflect the full range of abilities and aptitudes of students entering Year 12.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2009:

- use assessment information more precisely to plan learning activities that provide suitable challenge for all students and especially those who are more able – satisfactory
- improve provision and outcomes for post-16 students – satisfactory

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders have worked effectively together since the last monitoring visit to tackle urgent priorities and maintain the smooth day-to-day running of the academy during a period of further change. All requirements for the safe recruitment of staff are now met and rigorous steps have been taken to increase the effectiveness of all safeguarding procedures at the academy.

The capacity of the ALG has been strengthened by the additional support provided by the Associate Principal and National Leader of Education. Leaders at all levels have been very receptive to the support provided by external consultants to improve



the quality of teaching and learning and tackle weaknesses in sixth-form provision. However, senior leaders are aware of the need to reduce the academy's reliance on external support as the capacity of leadership at all levels to drive improvement increases.

The new Principal has quickly established an accurate view of the strengths and weaknesses of provision because of information provided by academy leaders and in consultation with the School Improvement Partner and representatives from the Department for Education. Development plans have already been drafted to re-structure the leadership framework to simplify lines of accountability and reflect the changes being planned in the curriculum structure to improve outcomes for students. The new Chair of the Governing Body is ambitious for the academy's future and clear about his role in evaluating the effectiveness of actions taken in meeting identified success criteria.

While the overall quality of middle leadership remains variable, middle leaders have benefited from training in lesson observation and are better equipped to identify teaching strategies that promote good learning. They report that they feel more accountable for the quality of learning in their subject area and have greater confidence to hold their team members to account.

Staff morale has improved since the last visit and there is a growing sense of optimism for the future. The Principal has communicated her vision for the academy to governors and staff which seeks to create 'a fully inclusive, aspirational, high-achieving centre of excellence, firmly rooted in the local community'. Plans are in hand to consult with all members of the academy community in order to share and shape the aims associated with this vision.

Progress on the areas for improvement identified by the inspection in October 2009:

- as a matter of urgency, ensure that all requirements for the safe recruiting of staff are met – good
- clarify the vision for the academy and ensure that evaluation of actions taken to implement that vision focus sharply on outcomes for students – satisfactory
- use the outcomes of lesson observations to identify and embed the teaching strategies that promote good learning and progress across the academy – satisfactory

External support

The pace of improvement has been enhanced significantly by an extensive range of external support. The Associate Principal and National Leader of Education have



worked effectively with academy leaders and the governing body on a range of projects including the re-structuring of the leadership framework, curricular planning, plans for the new academy buildings and the appointment of key personnel including the Principal. Academy leaders have welcomed the links established with the National Support School to share and develop best practice in teaching. The School Improvement Partner provides good levels of challenge and support for leaders and has facilitated the coaching for middle leaders to improve their skills in evaluating the quality of learning.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Secure the support and confidence of all the community to help make the academy a success.

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

Sara Morrissey
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
the Academies Group, Department for Education [Paul.hann@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk]