

Serco Inspections
Boundary House
2 Wythall Green Way
Middle Lane
BIRMINGHAM
West Midlands
B47 6LW

OFSTED
T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

SERCO
Direct T 0121 683 2888

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Mr Gould
Principal
St Alban's Academy
Angelina Street
Birmingham
B12 0UU

Dear Mr Gould

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of St Alban's Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Davinder Dosanjh HMI to your academy on 9 and 10 November 2010, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

The inspection 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 sponsors. No representative from the Department for Education attended the final feedback meeting. Inspectors checked the single central record and checked that safeguarding procedures met current government guidance.

Context

The St Alban's Academy is a smaller-than-average Church of England school sponsored by ARK with specialisms in engineering and mathematics. It opened in September 2009 replacing St Alban's CE Specialist Engineering College. St Alban's is the only state funded Church of England secondary school in Birmingham and the nearest secondary school to the city centre. The number of students known to be eligible for free school meals is very much higher than the national average. The number of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is over four times higher than

the national figure and the proportion of those who speak English as an additional language is high. The proportion of students registered by the academy as having special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above the national figure; however, the proportion of students with a statement of special educational needs is in line with that found nationally. There are a small number of children in the academy who are looked after by the local authority.

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

Attainment on entry to the academy and its predecessor school has been very low for the previous five years. The pattern of examination success at GCSE and in a range of vocational qualifications continues to improve and is well above that found nationally in many subjects, particularly in the academy's specialisms of mathematics and engineering. Assessment information indicates that the academy exceeded its targets in 2010.

In 2010, 90% of students gained five higher grade GCSEs. This was significantly above the national average; an impressive improvement of 47 percentage points in the last three years. Similarly, the proportion of students securing five higher grade GCSEs including English and mathematics has risen to 50% and is now in line with the national average. This is an increase of 34 percentage points over the last three years. However, attainment in English is well below average but is improving rapidly. Encouragingly, around 34% of students in the current Year 11 have already secured at least a C grade in English because of the academy's policy for early entry to examination courses. Nonetheless, such practice is not yet fully consistent enough to sustain outstanding learning and progress across key stages, subjects and year groups and, therefore, student progress and achievement is good.

Students achieve especially well in the in the academy's specialist subjects of mathematics, engineering and technology. All students follow an engineering and technology course where they get four hours a week providing a good amount of time to gain high achievement and for effective joint delivery of courses in partnership with a local college. Students at both key stages are involved in practical projects with industrial partners including Cadbury, BMW and ARUP. These projects focus on developing students' learning and thinking skills and the qualities that employers require in the workplace.

The academy sets suitably ambitious targets and makes very good use of rigorous assessment data to track the progress of individual students. It has worked hard to close the gap in performance between different groups and uses the tracking data to target specific intervention and support. Consequently, the progress made by all groups of students has increased steadily for the last four years and in 2009 was among the top two per cent of schools nationally.

Evidence from lesson observations indicates that students' attitudes to learning are highly positive. As a consequence, their progress is accelerating and their quality of learning is often good. Students make most rapid progress when lessons are lively

and engaging and when teachers use assessment information to define ambitious outcomes for each lesson.

Notwithstanding all of significant successes above, there is a small amount of under achievement in some major subjects and the academy recognises that there is further work to be done to ensure students achieve highly in all subjects.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Relationships between adults and students are very positive and a significant strength of the academy. The academy has instigated a range of highly effective measures to improve students' behaviour and their response in lessons. The academy rules are well known and were adhered to without fuss. Students are fully aware of the school's behaviour policy and say this has had a real impact on securing the consistently good behaviour observed in lessons and the very calm and respectful behaviour seen around the school. All serve to make a strong contribution to good learning in lessons.

Levels of persistent absence are higher than average but attendance has improved and is now average overall. The academy has taken strong measures to tackle a preconception in the community that holidays in term time are acceptable and that lengthy absences around religious festivals are also allowed. The academy is now taking a firm line and neither of these absences are authorised by the academy. Current attendance figures for this academic year are very encouraging and show improvements on last year's figures.

Many students are keen to make a positive contribution to the academy and the wider community, particularly through the student council, funding raising activities, sports leadership and 'sisters club'. Students speak enthusiastically about the opportunities that the academy has provided for them, and many take full advantage of the range of extra-curricular provision on offer.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality of teaching varies across the academy. There are notable strengths and some outstanding and good practice, particularly in its specialisms of mathematics and engineering. The most successful teachers sustain a rapid pace, a sharp focus that engages all the students and are extremely mindful of students' specific learning needs, particularly their language and linguistic needs. The best lessons include: planning that is precise and ambitious; imaginative activities that are, varied and skilfully managed; assessment processes that are integral to the students' learning, often involving the students themselves in peer- or self-assessment.

In spite of considerable improvements in teaching there remain pockets of poor performance. The most common limitations are: in planning, when the intended learning outcomes lack challenge because the teachers' use of assessment does not

take full account of students' prior learning; when there are over-long introductions to lessons; where teachers had not considered well enough how to deploy teaching assistants to secure good progress; and when teachers have not considered how different students will learn, particularly in daily literacy time.

Although students know their working levels and the grades or targets that they are aiming for, their next steps are not always effectively guided by marking. The academy has rightly introduced a new policy to rectify the inconsistencies in the quality of teachers' marking and clear guidance is now provided for teachers. In the best practice teachers are assessing students' achievement and are giving advice to students on how to make the next step in their learning. In many cases, a meaningful dialogue between students and teachers takes place but this is inconsistent across the academy. Importantly, on occasions, teachers' marking is too generous and in some cases too infrequent to be of benefit to students.

The academy has a broad curriculum well-matched to the needs and interests of students. It is effectively adapted to cater for the range of abilities and has led to improved behaviour and achievement. Saturday morning school provides even further literacy and numeracy support, including, one-to-one tuition and booster classes for GCSE mathematics and English. Students in Year 11 value the Saturday morning provision and see the link with improved levels of achievement. Early entry for modules in English, mathematics and science is proving to be motivating.

The extended school day allows time for the additional literacy, numeracy, basic skills and language teaching that the students need to enable them to catch up to expected levels and beyond. Students who need it also benefit from the intensive reading programme. However, the quality of teaching of aspects of the daily literacy programme is inconsistent.

The Year 9 curriculum includes an additional 30 minutes of project science four days each week in the lead lesson at the start of the day; the focus for this is science vocabulary and investigation skills. Further coherence and additional independent learning support is provided by five 'Super Learning Days' each year. This is when the normal academy timetable is suspended and students are engaged in more extended cross curricular and project-based learning activities.

Staff know the students well and the academy provides very effective care, guidance and support, including those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those whose circumstances make them vulnerable or at risk of failure or exclusion. Since Easter 2010, the academy has put in place specific provision for Yemeni students to close the gaps in their attainment and improve their English language skills.

Procedures for pastoral care are very clear and well organised. There is a strong caring ethos. The learning support centre and personalised leaning centre provide very good support for students whose circumstances make them vulnerable.

Provision includes support in anger management, mentoring, emotional intelligence group for boys.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The appointment of the headteacher from the predecessor school as Principal has ensured that the transition to academy status has been seamless in terms of day-to-day management and in retaining a very sharp focus on raising standards. He has a very clear vision and appreciation of the academy's current strengths and acknowledges the weaknesses which hinder efforts to raise attainment. He is clear that more needs to be done to capitalise on the improved climate for learning to ensure that the students achieve their potential. All safeguarding requirements are met.

Systems to monitor and track students' progress have been strengthened very considerably. Leaders and managers are vigilant in monitoring and improving all outcomes for students and the leadership of teaching and learning is, consequently, a strength. Evaluations of the quality of teaching are rigorous and are used effectively to strengthen classroom practice because they feed directly into the continuing professional development programme, as well as providing teachers with specific points for improvement. The academy is building capacity within the ranks of middle managers to sustain and drive improvement. There are well defined systems by which the senior staff support and challenge the subject leaders to improve performance in their subjects. Most of the middle leaders make a sound contribution to bringing about improvements to their departments and generally play a satisfactory role in monitoring aspects of teaching and learning. Nonetheless, in some departments the academy's procedures to measure progress or monitor the quality of teaching and learning are not rigorously or effectively applied.

The governing body is very knowledgeable about the academy and is, consequently, in a strong position to provide suitable challenge. The academy has demonstrated that it has good capacity to sustain and extend the improvements made in the first 14 months and to further strengthen the outcomes for students.

External support

The academy has not relied heavily on external support to guide its development because it has good capacity to shape its own improvement through the excellent links within the ARK network. Excellent links have been developed with a wide range of providers and partners to support key initiatives, including the academy's School Improvement Partner.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good or progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Accelerate the progress that all groups of students make by increasing the proportion of good and outstanding lessons, in particular by:
 - reviewing and improving the planning and teaching of the daily literacy time
 - ensuring teachers consistently use assessment information to plan challenging learning activities for the full range of student abilities
 - ensuring that teachers' marking is completed to a consistently high standard and has a clear rationale that facilitates faster progress by students
 - providing training on the effective deployment of teaching assistants to ensure best use is made of their time to support focused learning activities
 - ensuring that the subjects leaders fully implement and consistently apply the academy's procedures to monitor the quality of teaching and learning in their departments.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education, 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

Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector