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Mrs B Bell
Principal
The Crest Girls Academy
Crest Road
London
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Dear Mrs Bell

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Crest Girls Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Christopher Nye HMI to your academy on 24 and 25 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, visiting 19 parts of lessons. They also scrutinised documents and met with the Principal and other senior and middle leaders, groups of students, the current and previous Chairs of the Governing Body, a representative of the sponsors and the School Improvement Partner.

Context

There have been few changes to staffing since the academy opened and most of the teachers and support staff were employed at the predecessor school. The academy occupies the buildings of the predecessor school, but a new build is planned. The Crest Boys' Academy shares the same site. The two academies make sixth-form provision jointly and share the same Chair of the Governing Body. Both academies are sponsored by E-ACT, an educational charity.

There are 877 girls on roll, including approximately 158 in the sixth form. The numbers are not evenly spread across all year groups and there are fewer students

in the younger year groups. This is in part due to a surplus of secondary school places in the local area. Almost all of the students are from minority ethnic heritages. The largest groups are those of Black African, Pakistani and Afghan heritage but in all over 50 different backgrounds and as many different languages are represented. The large majority of the girls speak English as an additional language, with some at the early stages. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is well above that found nationally, as is the proportion identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. The proportion with a statement of special educational needs, however, is smaller than that found nationally. A relatively high proportion of students leaves or joins the academy during the course of the year. Some arrive with no experience of schooling in the United Kingdom and speaking little English. Attainment on entry to the academy is typically well below the levels expected for students' ages. The academy's specialisms are in technology and modern foreign languages and it has training school status.

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

The academy's first set of GCSE results was a substantial improvement on that of the last year of the predecessor school. The proportion of students gaining five good GCSEs, including English and mathematics, came close to the national figure. Two thirds of the students gained at least five good GCSE passes, which although below the national figure, was a marked improvement. These increases show that the academy is successfully closing the attainment gap; however, it is doing much better at this in English than mathematics. English results were in line with the national figure, whereas in mathematics they were significantly below it. There was also a strong performance in modern foreign languages, where results had a positive impact on the overall GCSE results. However, this was not matched by the results in technology, the academy's other specialism. In some aspects, the academy's results were better than the national picture. Those students eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities at 'School Action +' or with a statement of special educational needs attained more highly than their counterparts nationally. Conversely, students of Black African heritage and those at 'School Action' attained lower results than the national figure.

Taken overall, last year's Year 11 students made good progress from their starting points in Year 7. Their progress in English and mathematics was excellent, even though results in mathematics were low. Students who speak English as an additional language and those of Black African heritages made particularly good progress. The academy is now striving to ensure that the excellent progress in English and mathematics is maintained, and that progress in other subjects continues to accelerate. Supporting this drive is a wealth of assessment information that is regularly and robustly interrogated by senior leaders, curriculum leaders and individual teachers. There is a high degree of accountability. Photographs of every student are positioned in large year-group 'diamonds', and displayed for all to see. This makes abundantly clear who is on track to attain five good GCSEs and

highlights those who need to boost their performance in English, mathematics or another subject. The display also highlights the impact of students' attendance on their performance.

Challenging targets for attainment over the next two years have been set. Where targets have already been met, they have been revised upwards.

Other relevant outcomes

Students' good behaviour and positive attitudes make a strong contribution to their learning. Students in all year groups work very well independently, in pairs or in groups, and are able to negotiate with one another and make decisions. Students who spoke to inspectors were proud of their new uniform and were pleased with the improvements that they had noticed over the past year, both in the ways that they are able to contribute to the academy's life and in the classroom. Many mentioned the 'Crest Challenge' and the 'Junior Leadership Team' as positive initiatives that inspired them to do well. Attendance currently is in line with the national figure, but the proportion of students whose attendance has fallen below acceptable levels has increased, including in the sixth form. Some of this is attributable to religious festivals, but the 'Learning Plus' team keeps a close eye on these students and takes steps to support them to improve their attendance.

The effectiveness of provision

The impact of training for teachers was evident in the classroom. For example, work has been done to improve the effectiveness of questioning. Inspectors observed some good question-and-answer sessions in which students were expected to explain their ideas, express their views, or demonstrate something to the whole class. Questions were often open-ended and targeted at individuals so that all were encouraged to participate. At its best, teaching is lively, confident and engaging. Teachers' strong subject knowledge underpins carefully planned and organised lessons. Relationships are excellent and praise is used judiciously to encourage students to give of their best. A crisp but appropriate pace ensures that students build effectively on their prior learning. Students are active participants, experimenting, investigating or building their skills. Not all teaching is as strong as this, however. Where teaching is satisfactory, students are passive and compliant rather than actively and enthusiastically engaged, the pace is comfortable and the work rate is not swift. When planning lessons, teachers have in mind different outcomes for different groups of students. However, it is rare to see activities that are adapted to meet the immediate learning needs of these groups. More often, all students complete the same tasks. This is appropriate in some instances, of course, but the wealth of assessment information that the academy now holds brings with it the opportunity for teachers to fine-tune the tasks and activities that students are asked to do in lessons in order to maximise the progress that they make.

Improvements have been made to the curriculum to make it more responsive to individuals' needs and aspirations. The number of courses is increasing and steps are being taken to strengthen provision in technology; for example, food technology is being reintroduced. Regular 'stop the clock' days focus on developing students' thinking skills. Students were very appreciative of the increased range of extra-curricular activities.

The academy pays close attention to the well-being of the students and works to help them overcome particular barriers to learning. Staff know the students well and understand the challenges and difficulties that many face. They work well with a range of partner agencies to provide support for those who are potentially vulnerable.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The improvements in outcomes for the students stem from strong and clearly focused leadership. The principal sets the tone for this – she is highly visible around the academy and highly respected by staff at all levels and students alike. Senior and curriculum leaders share the vision and drive and there is a strong sense of teamwork. There is also a keen awareness of responsibility and accountability, and expectations are high. One particular success is the focused way the academy collects and uses a wide range of information about students' attainment and progress. The academy's improvement plans are sharply targeted on transforming provision and outcomes, and contain clear means of measuring success. Leaders have a secure understanding of the academy's strengths and aspects that require further development, but some judgements that they have made about aspects of provision and outcomes are not firmly rooted in evidence and, as such, reflect aspirations, rather than an accurate picture.

There is a robust cycle of monitoring and evaluation of aspects of provision, including the quality of teaching and learning. Areas for development are highlighted for individual teachers and followed up in subsequent observations. The academy is now embarking on training a group of student observers who visit lessons to judge how well students are learning. This is in the early stages of implementation, but feedback so far is that it is a positive and useful development.

Students' views are taken seriously. Students report that they are consulted, valued and included. During this inspection, a group of girls visited local shopping areas to canvass the views of members of the public about the academy. They had previously expressed concerns about the public perception of the academy; this activity was the first step in helping them decide what to do to change it.

The governing body is actively and effectively contributing to the ethos of improvement and challenging underachievement. Its members hold the academy to

account robustly and act swiftly to ensure that any areas of underperformance are addressed. They bring a wide range of relevant professional skills.

The many strengths in leadership, management and governance and the extent of the academy's achievements in its first year confirm that there is a good capacity to bring about further improvements.

Sixth form

The academy's sponsors raised concerns about the effectiveness of the sixth form. Changes to leadership ensued and have had a positive impact on the rate of improvement.

The sixth form offers courses at different levels to meet the needs of its intake, from pre-foundation courses for those recently arrived in the country to A level. Students completing A levels in 2010 began their sixth-form careers in the predecessor school and completed them in the academy. Attainment is improving, particularly in subjects such as business studies, mathematics, sociology, English literature and psychology. The academy is taking steps to improve outcomes in other subjects, especially biology and chemistry, but it is too soon to judge the impact. Sixth-form students say that teaching has improved over the past year. Retention rates are high, but attendance, especially of Year 12 students, is too low. The academy is dealing with this issue.

External support

The academy works very well with its partners in the drive to raise attainment. Particularly effective links have been made with Brunel University and Highgate School. These add a different dimension to the students' experiences and help enhance the skills of staff. It is not a one-way street, however, and the academy offers aspects of its own expertise to others.

The School Improvement Partner and E-ACT, the academy's sponsor, both monitor the academy's performance rigorously and regularly. A comprehensive list of performance indicators is used and the academy's performance rated against it. No punches are pulled in the feedback and judgements about the academy's performance and aspects that need immediate attention are explicitly stated. The rigour with which the academy's performance is monitored and leaders held to account makes a good contribution to the improvements that have been seen so far.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

No priorities for further improvement were identified. Leaders, the governing body and the academy's sponsor know where efforts need to be directed in order to sustain improvement. Implementation of existing plans should enable this to happen.

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

Linda McGill
Her Majesty's Inspector