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4 March 2011

Dame Sharon Hollows
Principal
Charter Academy
Hyde Park Road
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PO5 4HL

Dear Dame Sharon

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Charter Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Alan Taylor-Bennett HMI to your academy on 2 and 3 March 2011, 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 had discussions with the Principal, other leaders, groups of students, a representative from the academy sponsor and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

Charter Academy opened in September 2009 to replace St Luke's C of E VA Secondary School, with most students transferring from the school to the academy. The number of students had been falling prior to the predecessor school closing so the academy is smaller than most secondary schools. The number of students is now rising. Higher than average proportions of students have first languages other than English, are known to be entitled to free school meals or have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The Principal took up her post when the academy opened,

as did three of four vice-principals. Most staff joined the academy from the predecessor school. There has subsequently been significant turnover in staffing, including one vice-principal who has left. The academy has specialist status for mathematics and performing arts. An off-site base providing specialist behaviour support for students opened in January this year.

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

Students' progress is improving well and they are starting to enjoy their learning and to raise their aspirations. Results achieved by Year 11 students last summer were better than those in the predecessor school, although remaining well below the national averages. There were some inconsistencies in the progress of different groups of students, with girls and those with behavioural and social difficulties performing less well than others. Results in English, while showing gains, lagged behind those in mathematics. A renewed focus on these groups and on English is paying dividends so that progress is improving more evenly and securely across the academy. An increasing number of lessons are characterised by purposeful learning, particularly when tasks are practical. Many students have weak basic literacy and numeracy skills and although these are being tackled, they hinder learning.

Other relevant student outcomes

Behaviour has improved significantly with the majority of students more positive about learning. Attendance is not yet in line with national averages but is improving and fewer students are regularly absent. Students feel safer at the academy because there are fewer incidences of poor behaviour, including bullying. Relationships between different groups of students have improved and the atmosphere around the site and in most lessons is increasingly harmonious. Building their independence as learners is at an early stage and significant numbers of students are overly-dependent on teachers and other adults to move their learning forward. There are widening opportunities for students to make a contribution to the life of the academy through areas such as the student council, but further to go in ensuring they play a full role in developing its provision. Satisfactory progress is being made on students' awareness of how to lead healthy lives, with more enjoying the healthier meals on offer and the wider range of sport activities. However, influencing their lifestyles outside the academy is an area which staff are well aware remains to be tackled.

The effectiveness of provision

Improvements in teaching are gathering pace with a fall in inadequate teaching, more good quality lessons and higher expectations of students. An initial focus on better behaviour management and clear routines for learning is working well. Most lessons are orderly with positive relationships between students and staff. After an uncertain start, notably in English, good steps have been taken to sharpen the assessment of students' attainment and targets. As a result, teachers are more aware of what level of learning to provide. The good lessons offer practical tasks and

rich discussion to rehearse and extend students' ideas. Most lessons are planned with an expectation that students of differing ability will reach stretching but varied targets. However, activities are not always adjusted well to ensure students' differing needs are met so as to hit those targets. In particular, opportunities are missed to challenge students to work independently, to set work at different levels for different groups and to tailor questioning based on students' varied attainment. Good progress is being made in helping students understand their targets through systems such as stickers in books. Where teachers articulate learning objectives effectively, students are gaining confidence in understanding how to move their work on toward their targets. However, this is not yet consistent enough. Much effort is put into marking although here, too, there are variations in how well it engages students in responding to it, and in tackling the widespread weakness in grammar and spelling.

The curriculum is being adapted thoughtfully to tackle a legacy of low attainment and to prepare students better for further and higher education. Sensible short-term adjustments, such as early entry to examinations in mathematics and English for Year 11 students, are building their skills and improving their confidence. Some difficult decisions are managed well in adjusting the curriculum. For example, changing older students' courses where progress is too slow to ensure they achieve a meaningful package of qualifications. Effective use is being made of the extended study time now available and students spoken to understood the value of this in giving them the basic skills they need. Literacy and numeracy are an appropriately high priority in the extended time but their development is not systematic enough across the wider curriculum. Students value the enhanced enrichment activities on offer, within which the performing arts subjects are making a good contribution.

Care, guidance and support are developing well in response to students' needs, leading to the improvements in behaviour and attendance. Procedures for identifying and supporting students are increasingly systematic and there is a determination to stop any falling through the net. Work with external agencies is growing in strength and staff are proactive in developing it. For example, weak progress by students with behavioural and social difficulties prompted the establishment of the off-site base. Provision here, including an adapted curriculum, is beginning to make a positive impact on outcomes for these students.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Leaders are providing growing capacity for improvement. The Principal has a clear vision for the future and is steadfast in tackling barriers to progress. Accountability for students' achievement is clear and devolved to all levels of leadership. The senior leadership team is making a variable impact; it is most consistent in improving behaviour and the ethos for learning but less assured until this year in driving up the quality of teaching and assessment. Monitoring of teaching has focused with increasing effect on building teachers' skills and robustly addressing inadequate practices. This has resulted in high staff turnover where teachers have not

responded to support, but is now settling. The monitoring of teaching gives leaders an accurate understanding of its quality, but does not always focus enough on students' learning when identifying the next steps for improvement. The strategic development plan sets challenging goals for students' achievement and personal development, but is less clear about how teaching will be improved further. It contains worthwhile ideas but does not prioritise the steps required so as to systematically identify what is working and what is not. The now more accurate assessment data is being used with increasing effect to monitor the impact of initiatives on students. The visual display of this information is having a galvanic effect on leaders. The quality of subject leadership is growing, but subject leaders are not all monitoring and developing their areas with the confidence needed to ensure provision is at least good. The governors are committed to the academy and receive a useful flow of information. Effective teamwork is developing with staff from the sponsor to monitor and challenge across the full range of academic and social outcomes for students. A deficit budget is set for this year but there are sound plans for recovery in the following year.

External support

Support and challenge from the academy sponsor is making a good impact, including in vital areas such as personnel and finance. It is well coordinated via contact with academy leaders and the governing body. Monitoring is accurate, enabling areas such as the leadership of teaching, where improvement lacked momentum, to be identified and steps taken.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

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

Stephen Long
Her Majesty's Inspector