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20 October 2011

Mrs Cheryl Heron
Principal
St Aldhelm's Academy
Herbert Avenue
Poole
BH12 4HS

Dear Mrs Heron

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of St Aldhelm's Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Stephen McShane HMI to your academy on 18 and 19 October 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 met with the principal, senior and support staff, a group of students, and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

The St Aldhelm's Academy opened in September 2010. It is housed in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. The academy's sponsors are the Church of England Salisbury Diocese and Bournemouth University. It has subject specialisms in mathematics and sports.

There are currently 456 students aged 12 to 18 years on roll; 29 of these students started in the sixth form in September 2011. Most of the students are of White

British origin. A small number of students speak English as an additional language. Twenty three per cent of students are eligible for free school meals. Forty four per cent of the students are identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities which is well above average, although the proportion of students with a statement of educational needs is below average.

Almost all staff of the predecessor school transferred to the academy when it opened. However, during the last year, there has been an extended period of turbulence which resulted in high levels of staff changes. A number of staff left the academy during its first year and the academy has had difficulties in appointing suitably qualified and experienced staff. Long-term staff absence remains a significant issue. During its first year, the principal consulted upon and subsequently implemented a staffing review. Four vice principals currently support the principal.

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

Students' attainment on entry to the academy is exceptionally low. The proportion of students who gained five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C including English and mathematics in 2011 was exceptionally low. Current attainments for literacy and numeracy are well below national expectations in all year groups. Listening skills are generally weak and students' responses to questions are often brief and expressed in partial sentences. Presentation and accuracy of written work are frequently not satisfactory. Attainments are low partly as a result of a legacy of historic underachievement and variability in teaching. The academy's most recent tracking of information indicates that students' rates of progress are improving and that more are on course to reach their targets. For example, the most recent checks on Year 11 students' attainment, indicate that just over a third of students are likely to gain five A* to C GCSE grades including both English and mathematics. This indicates satisfactory progress for this group and a significant improvement on 2011. Students in vocational lessons, many of whom were at risk of disaffection, are now more engaged in learning.

Satisfactory progress has been made in setting up systems and procedures to check students' attainment and progress at regular intervals. Trial GCSE examinations and end of year tests have been analysed to identify students in need of intensive support. Staff have received training on understanding how assessment data can be used to show progress against students' starting points. Other professional development activities have focused on how information on previous learning can be used to ensure classroom activities are matched to students' academic needs. Teaching in some subjects, like science and art, offers models of good practice on which further improvements can be built.

Senior leaders have an accurate view of the academy's work, recognise where improvements have been made and what further actions need to be taken. They are concentrating their efforts on Year 11 students by targeting individual students' need

and a range of intervention strategies have been put in place with assessment data being used to measure the impact. Senior leaders are now taking the intervention programme to the next logical stage, which is to begin earlier with Year 10 students.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Good progress has been made towards developing students' personal skills through consistent concerted efforts, clearly directed by leaders and managers and applied well by the staff. Students report they feel safe in school. Relationships between adults and students are positive and the support that students receive reflects the academy's inclusive ethos. Students view the support that they get from staff very positively. They say that they are helped when they have problems, but are also encouraged to aspire to higher things by recognising their own potential. Students' emotional well-being is successfully supported through the house system and contacts with other professionals. Attendance has improved significantly since the academy opened and is now in line with national averages. Attendance has improved as a result of the students' greater enjoyment of school as the curriculum closely matches their interests. The trend of improvement applies across all year groups. The rate of fixed-term exclusions has also reduced significantly.

The effectiveness of provision

Senior leaders have an accurate view of teaching and learning and acknowledge that while the quality of teaching and learning is improving with more that is good, there is a pressing need to eradicate inadequate teaching. Inspection evidence indicates appropriate plans are in place to address this. Senior leaders have rightly placed improving teaching and learning at the heart of the academy's improvement and raising attainment plan. In the lessons visited jointly with senior leaders during the monitoring inspection, there was evidence of inconsistency in classroom practice. There was evidence of positive and constructive relationships in classrooms, and satisfactory behaviour. Planning of lessons indicates teachers are beginning to use a range of strategies to develop learning. Common strengths include teachers giving clear explanations and, given the opportunity, students working sensibly in pairs or groups. Characteristics of the good lessons, which constitute a third, include effective sequencing of activities and the constant monitoring of how well students were learning. Misconceptions were anticipated and individual responses and errors turned into teaching points. In the weaker lessons, students were passive and not sufficiently engaged in group work or question and answer sessions. The pace of lessons was slow and not all starter activities got students discussing their work. Opportunities to adapt tasks and resources to support students' identified needs were missed. An area for development is to further tailor teaching to meet the range of students' needs and abilities. More attention is also required to develop students' literacy and numeracy skills explicitly.

The curriculum has satisfactorily been reviewed and changed to ensure it better meets the needs of students. Vocational courses have been developed extensively.

Senior leaders have clearly identified the learning needs of students entering Year 8 and have developed an innovative curriculum which matches their needs: a primary skills based approach with a sharp focus on improving basic skills so that students can fully access the curriculum throughout Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. In Years 9 and 10 there is flexibility to enable students to pursue a wider range of courses relevant to their interests and abilities. Those students requiring alternative educational programmes have been identified and packages more carefully tailored to their needs. All these initiatives are having an increasingly positive impact on students' motivation to succeed academically.

The sixth form is in the early stages of development but initial indications are positive. Strong efforts to maximise the benefits of partnership working and consultation with students and their parent and/or carers have helped to ensure that students are happy with the start they have made in the sixth form.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The principal and senior team share a strong commitment to ensuring the best for the students. Progress has been hindered by transitional arrangements for the academy. However, the principal has worked tirelessly to challenge weak practice and praise the effective. Students and many staff attribute the improvements in ethos to her leadership and visible presence around the academy. Improvements in the rates of progress, the curriculum, behaviour and a measurable increase in the attendance of students indicate that the academy has satisfactory capacity for sustained improvement. The significant staffing difficulties, particularly in the leadership of English and mathematics, have adversely affected the rate of progress the academy made in the previous academic year; these are now partly resolved. The principal has an accurate understanding of what is required to urgently secure better outcomes for students and, supported by a full complement of senior leaders, is providing clear strategic leadership on the academy's key priorities. An effective process of self-evaluation, including lesson observations, has been established. This has started to have a positive impact on students' achievement and the quality of teaching and learning.

Some middle managers are new in post and difficulties with recruitment and retention have had a considerable impact at this level of management. For example, there has been a lack of continuity in the management of English and mathematics, which have very recently had changes in leadership. The new staff are enthusiastic and good practitioners but inexperienced in management. The effectiveness of middle managers is too variable and this is restricting students' progress. For example, some are not yet sufficiently skilled in the analysis and evaluation of performance in their subjects.

Senior leaders have secured a stable environment by having a relentless focus on improving behaviour. Students speak positively about these changes and recount the

recent improvements; the reduction in the number of exclusions and improving attendance rates are a testimony to this. Procedures to ensure the safety of students meet government guidelines and are effective.

External support

The academy makes effective use of links with external partners, including local businesses, to provide curricular and work-place opportunities for vulnerable and disaffected students. The principal has commissioned a number of external reviews and is working closely with consultants to raise the quality of teaching and learning further.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise achievement by increasing the proportion of good or better lessons and eliminating inadequate practice.
- Ensure middle leaders develop the skills to rigorously monitor, evaluate and drive improvements in order to embed systems and raise standards.

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

Yours sincerely

Kekshan Salaria

Her Majesty's Inspector