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23 April 2012

Mr Patrick Ferguson
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Dear Mr Ferguson

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The De La Salle Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Mark Williams HMI to your academy on 19–20 April 2012, 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, including observations of 18 lessons and other shorter visits to classrooms. They scrutinised documents and met with the Principal and other leaders, teachers, members of the governing body and other staff. Inspectors also spoke with a large number of students, randomly selected from observed lessons.

Context

The De La Salle Academy is a boys' academy sponsored by the De La Salle Brothers, working in partnership with co-sponsors the Archdiocese of Liverpool and Liverpool Hope University. It was established in January 2011, taking staff and students from its predecessor school, De La Salle Humanities College. The Principal was the headteacher of the predecessor school and is a National Leader in Education. The academy specialises in English and Media.

The academy's standard admission number is 120, although almost all year groups have fewer than 90 students currently. There are 359 students on roll in the main school and 61 in the sixth form. The student population is typically very stable as movement of students in or out of the academy other than at Years 7 and 11 has been uncommon. Similarly, there have been no departures of teaching staff since the academy opened, although nine new members have been appointed, some on a part-time basis to teach newly-introduced subjects in Key Stage 4 or the sixth form.

The vast majority of students are White British and the remainder come from a diverse range of minority ethnic backgrounds. A much higher than average proportion of students is known to be eligible for free school meals. Although a small number of students speak English as an additional language, none are in the early stages of learning English. An average proportion of students who are disabled or have special educational needs are supported at school action. A well above average percentage is supported at school action plus or has a statement of special educational needs.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

For a significant proportion of students, attainment on entry is below the expected Level 4 in both English and mathematics. A smaller than average proportion of students enter the academy having reached the higher Level 5 in national tests at the end of Key Stage 2, and an above average number enter at Level 3 or below.

The proportion of students achieving at least five A* to C grades in GCSE examinations with English and mathematics included in 2011 was above the current government floor standards, which set the minimum expectation for attainment and progress. However, there were variations in the performance of different subjects with regard to students' levels of progress. While this was positive in English and in line with the national average, it was not the case in mathematics. The academy's accurate self-evaluation identified that too many students in the middle-ability range just missed their grade C targets in mathematics last year. The positive impact of actions taken to remedy this situation was observed during this monitoring inspection. Year 11 students in the targeted intervention groups were making at least good progress in improving their speed, accuracy and confidence in mathematics to move up from their D grade assessments towards achievement at grade C or above. The academy also recognised that students' poor performance in the 2011 history GCSEs was affected by insufficient preparation for the new examination syllabus. Swift action was taken to address this, so that early entry results and students' current work shows that history results in 2012 will demonstrate the significant improvements made. Students observed in history lessons at Key Stage 4 and the sixth form were making good progress and responding well to teachers' high expectations and challenge in examination-based questions and responses.

Few students gained the highest grades A or A* in any subjects at GCSE or A Level in 2011. The academy is aware of the potential to increase this figure as students' levels of confidence and aspiration continue to grow. There is a clear determination to narrow the gaps in attainment for all groups of students so that they are well prepared for their future and have secure skills in literacy and numeracy. The academy's accurate assessment data indicate that it is on target to achieve a 10% increase in the achievement of five or more A* to C grades with English and mathematics included in 2012. This shows that students' attainment is moving much closer to the national average as a result of the progress they make in the academy, which is at least good for all groups of students. This is borne out in observations of students' work during lessons. The impact of the academy's English specialism is evident in the development of students' literacy skills across the curriculum and the inclusion of key vocabulary in the lesson plans for all subjects. The media specialism has been a driving force in ensuring that high-quality resources and provision engage and enthuse students, particularly those who may lack confidence and motivation in some subjects. This is evident in students' interest and high levels of progress in the relatively new courses in Media or Film Studies at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.

The quality of teaching

In almost all of the lessons seen during this monitoring inspection, teaching was good or better and none was inadequate. Common strengths include teachers' very strong subject knowledge, allowing them to break down learning into manageable 'chunks' to meet the needs of different groups of students such as those who are less able. Good questioning, prompting and challenge help to maintain a good pace of learning for all ability groups. Lessons are well planned with good attention paid to providing a range of interesting activities and resources to meet students' learning needs. Teachers ensure that opportunities for students to express their views and practise their communication skills are commonplace. This supports students' good development of confidence and independence, so that they increasingly believe in themselves and in their own potential. Excellent relationships between students and staff and the high quality of care, guidance and support provided by the academy contribute to the effectiveness of teaching and learning across the main school and the sixth form.

Teachers make good use of information from regular assessments to support students' learning and move it on to the next level, for example, through reference to targets or grade criteria, and by encouraging self-assessment. The quality and regularity of marking and feedback to students are good, although not fully consistent across all subjects. Where teachers' marking is particularly effective, this also ensures that students have precise information about how to improve. Where questioning is at its best, teachers probe students' understanding, provide thinking time and prompt them to answer in more depth or complexity according to their individual levels of attainment. On occasions, there is a tendency for teachers to intervene too quickly and provide more information or answers themselves rather than ensuring that students respond to their challenging questions. However,

teachers are very reflective practitioners and are fully involved in the academy's drive for continuous improvement, exploring ways to ensure that more teaching is outstanding. This is evident in their commitment to sharing best practice and engaging in a whole-academy programme of external support and coaching.

Teaching makes a very positive contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development with aspects permeating many of the lessons observed. For example, students' social skills were evident in their sensible and often mature responses to working in pairs or groups to discuss a range of topics. These included moral dilemmas, ethical issues, cultural differences and spiritual aspects, such as the willingness to reflect on their own experiences or use creativity and imagination in their writing.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Inspectors observed nothing less than good behaviour and much that was outstanding. The management of behaviour is positive and consistent, so that students do not feel any sense of unfairness. Students demonstrate high expectations of themselves and of others and they understand and live by the academy's boundaries for acceptable behaviour whether in or out of classes. This contributes to the academy's excellent ethos for learning. The students themselves talk about the mutual respect between themselves and the staff, saying that 'adults never talk down to us and we are listened to'. This sets a good example for students, who listen to and value each other's views and contribute to the academy's inclusive and harmonious learning community. The significant number of students who spoke with inspectors expressed a unanimous view that they enjoy being at the academy, it keeps them safe and gives them a good understanding of how to minimise risks to their own safety.

Very good punctuality and above average attendance at the academy are the norm. There are several striking examples of the impact of the academy's actions on improving the attendance of some individual students who were at risk of becoming persistent absentees.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The outstanding leadership of the Principal, ably supported by senior leaders and the governing body, is a key factor in the academy's continuous improvement from the predecessor school's highly effective performance. The academy's ambitious vision of the highest expectations and aspirations for its students is shared by all staff and leadership is respected and trusted. Leaders at all levels work effectively as a team to ensure that standards continue to rise through rigorous self-evaluation and action planning for improvement. The academy demonstrates a good capacity to improve, based on its track record to date and the recent history of the predecessor school. Leaders are constantly reviewing the curriculum to ensure it meets the changing needs of groups of students. Financial decisions are carefully considered to ensure that available resources are targeted towards key development priorities and thereby

have a positive impact on students' achievement. The governing body and senior leaders make judicious use of a number of external consultants, including those who have a proven track record of successful work with the academy.

The academy's positive impact on changing students' lives is evident in the quality and continuous improvement of teaching, learning, and students' personal and social development. Systems for the performance management and recruitment of staff ensure that all 'buy into' the academy's vision and values. These include a commitment to social cohesion, raising in a positive way the profile of its local community. This is demonstrated in a number of ways, such as the award-winning parents' group FAST project, a long tradition of charity work, and the sporting events that bring together students from different areas of the community affected by a negative youth culture in the recent past.

External support

The academy makes good use of the time and expertise provided by its sponsors, members of the governing body and external consultants, to help raise students' attainment further. The support of the De La Salle brothers has not only provided much-valued resources through the donation of the student hotel building, but also helps to ensure that the work of the academy is underpinned by gospel values and inclusion. Partnerships with co-sponsors Liverpool Hope University and with other universities and schools help to extend the range of experiences and opportunities open to students, including for those in the sixth form.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise attainment and increase the proportion of students achieving five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C with English and mathematics included, by:
 - building on the academy's recent work to ensure the success of intervention sessions for students who may be in danger of missing their minimum target of grade C, for example in mathematics
 - using the academy's ongoing professional development opportunities to increase the proportion of teaching that is consistently outstanding
 - ensuring that more students who may be capable of reaching the higher grades A* and A are fully challenged and supported to reach their potential.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Education the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Advisers Unit at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Marguerite Murphy
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body, Brother Thomas Campbell
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