

Tribal
1-4 Portland Square
Bristol
BS2 8RR

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

Direct T 0117 3115319
Direct F 0117 3150430
Direct email: matthew.parker@tribalgroup.com

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Mr Mark Poulter
Principal
Wilmington Academy
Common Lane
Wilmington
DA2 7DR

Dear Mr Poulter

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Wilmington Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Anne Wellham, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 2-3 May 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, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, senior and teaching staff, a group of students and the Chair of the Governing Body.

Context

Wilmington Academy opened in September 2010. It is housed in the same accommodation as its predecessor school. The academy consists of two small schools, each with their own vice-principals and assistant principal. The specialist subjects are business and enterprise and vocational studies. The academy is open six days a week and is due to move into new buildings in September 2013. The academy is sponsored by The Leigh Academies Trust, Kent County Council and the University of Kent. Sixth form education is provided in collaboration with The Leigh Technology Academy and Longfield Academy. The academy is non-selective but operates in an area with grammar schools.

There are currently 820 students, aged 11 to 18 years, on roll; 120 of these students are in the sixth form. Most of the students are of White British origin. A small number of students speak English as an additional language. Fifteen per cent of students are eligible for free school meals. Twenty per cent of the students are identified as being disabled or having special educational needs, which is well above average. Almost all staff of the predecessor school transferred to the academy when it opened. However, during the last year, there have been high levels of staff changes.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

Since the opening of the academy, staff have worked hard to create a successful and positive learning environment. Senior leaders have ensured a focus on Years 7, 8 and 9, in which students are now achieving the expected levels of progress at Key Stage 3.

At Key Stage 4, good improvement has been made in students' attainment in GCSE examinations. The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C rose from 57% in 2009, in the predecessor school, to 88% in 2011. The proportion of students gaining five good passes at GCSE, including English and mathematics, increased from 11% in 2009 to 49% in 2011. The academy's most recent tracking information indicates that attainment and the rate of students' progress continue to improve; many of the Year 11 students have already taken a number of examinations. The results clearly indicate that more students are on course to reach their targets or are working at the appropriate levels for their ages. The academy reports that it is on track to exceed last year's results.

The recently introduced system for monitoring attainment and tracking students' progress is robust, and has resulted in interventions that are targeted more specifically at groups and individual students. 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 from students' starting points. Other professional development activities have focused on how information on students' previous learning can be used to ensure classroom activities are matched to their academic needs. Teaching in some subjects, for example in mathematics, offers models of good practice on which further improvements can be built.

The quality of teaching

The quality of teaching and learning observed during the inspection was always at least satisfactory, with much that was good. Senior leaders have an accurate view of teaching and learning. In the very best lessons, teachers are successful in creating a classroom environment where students enjoy learning through challenging, stimulating and varied activities. Teachers pause to review learning during lessons and make good links to the next phase of the lesson. Students are attentive and focus on achieving well. They are becoming more active participants in evaluating

their own progress, rather than passive recipients of teachers' feedback. This is as a result of the academy's focus on assessment for learning. The gap between satisfactory and good lessons tends to result from variability in teachers' experience, expertise, subject knowledge and confidence in using assessment information to inform day-to-day planning and learning. Although most lessons are planned with a view to ensuring that activities are matched to different learning needs, further refinements are necessary. In some of the satisfactory lessons, teachers' questioning is used well to share students' ideas, to stimulate discussion and to allow further development of thought, but teachers do not always ensure that students give extended answers or use vocabulary which is of sufficiently high level. Additionally, some activities are pitched at the average-attaining students and, as a result, there is insufficient challenge for higher attainers or support for those who find the task difficult.

At the heart of the academy's ethos is the provision of personalised care for students. For example, dedicated staff led by the Director of Learning for Literacy, have spearheaded the development of reading by ensuring all faculties have a literacy plan. A whole academy read-a-thon has been an overwhelming success with students and parents. The learning resources centre has been updated with books and other materials, including iPads, and this has led to a doubling in the number of loans. Inspectors observed the library buzzing with students enjoying the facilities.

The curriculum has been reviewed satisfactorily and changed to ensure it better meets the needs of students. For example, vocational courses have been developed, leading to increased enjoyment and participation for students. The curriculum reflects the academy's specialisms, but the specialist areas are not yet driving improvements across the whole academy. Senior leaders have clearly identified the learning needs of students entering Year 7 and have ensured a sharp focus on improving basic skills so that students can gain full access to the curriculum throughout Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

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 parents and carers have helped to ensure that students are happy with the start they have made in the sixth form.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Students are proud of the academy. They are polite, courteous and say that they feel safe and very well supported. The academy helps students develop their self-belief and confidence as learners and this is related to a pattern of improving behaviour, which was commented on by students and staff alike. Inspectors observed both good and exemplary behaviour in lessons and around the site. Improvements in behaviour have resulted in a marked reduction in both the rate of exclusions and the number of days lost to exclusion, from the previously high rates. Students of all backgrounds get on well together and have confidence that the adults in the academy will sort out any problems. They speak enthusiastically about

the many opportunities for activities within lessons and outside the curriculum. For example, a Year 7 student spoke with enthusiasm about a trip to Spain which has improved his use of Spanish. The high level of commitment to pastoral care is much appreciated by the students. Healthy eating is well promoted by the excellent catering arrangements, which provide fresh food of a very high quality, expertly prepared on site. Robust procedures ensure that levels of attendance are good.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The principal has brought skilful leadership, clear vision and direction and, by working alongside an effective leadership team, has managed the process of change well. Together they have achieved a remarkable amount in a very short time. Students and many staff attribute the improvements in ethos to his leadership and visible presence around the academy. Improvements in the rates of progress, teaching and students' behaviour, together with a measurable increase in the attendance of students, indicate that the academy has good capacity for sustained improvement. An effective process of self-evaluation, including lesson observations, underpinned by a wealth of performance and progress data, has been established. This has had a positive impact on students' achievement and the quality of teaching and learning. Inspectors observed evidence of collaborative working by staff, based on a shared vision and a drive to secure improvements, particularly in the quality of teaching and learning and in raising attainment. Senior leaders know that improving teaching is vital in order to accelerate students' progress still further. To this end, the quality of teaching is frequently checked and well-focused mentoring, coaching, guidance and training are provided for those teachers who need it. This work is having a positive impact and the proportion of teaching that is good or outstanding is increasing.

Staff are held to account for their performance and decisive action is taken when areas of weakness are identified. The academy has set challenging targets for staff and students and, while senior leaders do not underestimate the task of achieving these targets, there is a common determination and capacity to succeed. Some middle managers are new in post and difficulties over recruitment and retention have had a considerable impact at this level of management. Consequently, the effectiveness of middle managers is too variable and this is restricting students' progress. For example, some are not sufficiently skilled in analysing and evaluating students' performance in their subjects. This is particularly the case in the sixth form where senior leaders are currently unable to provide accurate and up-to-date information on the progress of students because the system to monitor it has been developed only recently. It appears to be fit for purpose and is already generating some useful information but it does not yet provide a sufficiently comprehensive picture of students' achievement. Senior leaders are aware of this, and are working hard to rectify the situation.

Lines of accountability are secure and the Principal is accountable to the governing body, whose members play a prominent role in shaping the academy's direction and holding it to account for its performance. They are assiduous in ensuring that

statutory responsibilities are met. Good, secure safeguarding procedures and practices are in place. Checks on new staff are carried out correctly and recorded well and staff are confident and well trained in ensuring students' safety.

External support

The academy has worked in close and valued partnership with the sponsors. Regular contact between the Principals from the sister academies in the Leigh Trust Community provide valued opportunities for the Principal and staff to have professional dialogue and share good practice.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Strengthen the quality of middle leaders and secure effective leadership and management of the sixth form to ensure better achievement for all students.

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

Kekshan Salaria
Her Majesty's Inspector