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15 June 2012

Mr Andrew Crofts
Principal
The Quest Academy
Farnborough Avenue
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Dear Mr Crofts

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of The Quest Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Stephen Long, Her Majesty's Inspector, to your academy on 13 and 14 June 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, the Executive Principal, the Chair of the Governing Body, groups of students and senior and middle leaders. In addition, telephone discussions were held with a school improvement adviser and a representative of the Teach First teacher education initiative.

Context

The Quest Academy – Coloma Trust opened in September 2010 on the site of the predecessor school. It is sponsored by The Coloma Trust and Coloma Convent Girls' School. The academy Principal was appointed for its opening and at the same time the headteacher of Coloma became Executive Principal, overseeing the work of both schools.

The academy specialises in mathematics and physical education. It provides education for students aged 11 to 16, but will open sixth form provision, Quest 6, in

September 2012. There has been some interim refurbishment of the existing school buildings, with a £14.5 million new building programme planned for completion in 2014. Since the opening of the academy, a new senior leadership team has been established and 16 staff posts have been made redundant. There will be further changes in staffing in September 2012, including changes to leadership of the specialist subjects.

There are currently 468 students on roll. About one third are known to be eligible for free school meals, more than double the national average. A higher-than-average proportion, approximately two thirds, are from minority ethnic backgrounds and about 40% speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students who are disabled or have special educational needs is broadly average. A higher number than usual join or leave the school at times other than the conventional ones.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

The proportion of students attaining five or more GCSEs at grade C or higher, including English and mathematics, has risen steeply since the academy opened, narrowing the gap with the national average. Given that students enter the academy with attainment that is significantly lower than average, this represents rapidly accelerating progress. This improvement is the result of an unrelenting focus on students' achievement, underpinned by rigorous tracking of their progress to ensure they meet their targets. Performance is improving for all, including groups who previously underachieved significantly, for example those with special educational needs and White British students.

Students' attitudes to learning are highly positive. They know their targets and say that their confidence in their ability to meet them is growing because teachers' expectations are much higher than in the past. They are very appreciative of the additional support the academy offers them, for example through intervention, mentoring and study support. This raft of supplementary teaching has been an essential component of the drive for improvement. A range of intervention is helping to secure improving GCSE results, as well as to address students' individual needs, such as for targeted support in literacy or for the rapid development of English language skills for students who speak English as an additional language.

The quality of teaching

Teachers' understanding of the wide range of students' learning needs is improving, supported by high quality assessment information. In the best lessons, this influences teachers' planning to good effect. For example, students in a health and social care lesson worked diligently and made good progress because the task was tailored closely to grade criteria which matched their ability levels. In an English lesson, the teacher used puppet imagery to engage students' thinking about manipulation in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Through carefully structured opportunities to discuss this theme, students, including those whose English is at an early stage of development, were able to show sophisticated knowledge of character. The

teacher's probing questioning developed discussion further, to encompass the representation of race and power in the play.

Teachers' use of grade or level criteria to help students know how to improve their work is developing, although it is not always sharply focused on the specific range of learning within a class. Books are marked regularly and mostly with constructive comments, although the impact of this feedback on subsequent work is variable. Teachers demonstrate a growing understanding of strategies to engage students and to make learning accessible to all. Relationships between students and teachers are respectful and productive, so that learning can progress uninterrupted.

Where teaching remains only satisfactory, it is often because teachers have not clarified the learning objectives sufficiently, so that students are unclear about the purpose of the lesson or task. Teachers sometimes move on before learning has been deepened or consolidated. Students often lack the skills to articulate their learning fully but some lesson planning takes too little account of this difficulty. Teachers' questioning too frequently accepts and rewards limited or poorly expressed answers. There are too few models of learning to help students know how to develop and structure more complex responses, whether orally or in writing. There are notable exceptions. In an English lesson, students were animated in their discussion of characters in a play. Those who gave the most powerful and detailed responses were used to support and coach others, so that understanding was shared and extended. The teacher judged well when to stop discussion for clarification and to probe thinking, so that each segment of the lesson led to deeper understanding.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Improvements in policies and systems for managing behaviour and ensuring students' safety are having a good impact. The monitoring and tracking of behaviour are increasingly effective and are leading to well-targeted intervention and support. Exclusions or serious behaviour incidents are reducing sharply as a result. Students understand and respect internal sanctions, for example, through the use of the isolation and inclusion areas. These are helping to reduce repeat offences and ensure that learning is maintained. Students feel safe and express confidence in the academy to deal effectively with any instances of bullying, which many who spoke to inspectors say are now rare. Lessons are usually calm; there is little disruption to learning. However, students are sometimes passive or fail to engage with the lesson fully, particularly if activities are not well matched to their needs or if explanations lack clarity. Attendance has improved sharply. Where the attendance of key groups of students has been significantly lower than average, these gaps are closing rapidly. This improving picture is aided by meticulous monitoring, well-focused work with families and a successful reward system.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The Principal communicates to all members of staff clear and high expectations of their accountability for the academy's success. Line management systems are robust. The management of staff performance is linked directly to students' achievement and to the academy's development priorities. Senior leaders make

effective use of achievement, attendance and behaviour data to evaluate success and challenge underperformance. The capacity of middle leaders to share and lead the drive for further improvement is increasing, although still developing as new roles become established.

The curriculum has undergone significant adjustment to secure rapid improvement in examination results. There is a move towards greater academic challenge, while maintaining a breadth of options. There is an increasing focus on literacy and numeracy development, supported by well-targeted support for reading through withdrawal from mainstream lessons. Senior leaders move quickly to remove or adjust any courses that prove unsuccessful. The enrichment programme is growing well and is making a positive contribution to students' social and cultural development.

The impact of actions to improve teaching remains variable, despite some strengths. Evaluations of teaching are not always focused sharply enough on learning. Developmental points are not always given sufficient prominence in subsequent observations of lessons, so that the cycle of evaluation is less immediately influential on classroom practice than it might be. Academy leaders acknowledge that there is more to be done in this respect and improvement planning reflects this need. Their evaluation of the academy's performance has been thorough, although some internal judgements are over-generous because they reflect progress from a low base, rather than the current picture. Students' views reflect this. Older students describe the academy as a safe, friendly environment that is preparing them well for the future. They say that it has given them 'another chance at life'. Younger students are proud to be members of the academy but rightly feel that there is scope for further improvement and particularly say that teaching can be better.

External support

The Principal makes good use of external support to develop leadership capacity and to contribute to evaluations of the academy's performance. The close relationship with the sponsor has underpinned developments. The Executive Principal and Principal have worked in close partnership from the outset to establish the academy vision, secure financial stability and drive immediate improvement in examination results. A range of additional support from Coloma has helped to develop middle and senior leadership capacity. This has included: sharing the experience of GCSE examiners; jointly moderating coursework; and jointly observing and evaluating teaching. Coloma's long-established expertise in sixth form teaching and course development is informing the creation of Quest 6.

Main judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Sustain the steep rise in achievement through consistently good or better teaching throughout the academy, by ensuring that all teachers:
 - regularly check students’ understanding of learning objectives and how they link to activities
 - provide models of learning so that expectations are clear and students are able to approach tasks with confidence
 - allow time to consolidate learning, check understanding and reshape tasks accordingly before moving the lesson on
 - develop students’ capacity to articulate their learning through structured opportunities for talk and through questioning that probes and extends their responses.

- Ensure that evaluations of teaching focus sharply on how to improve learning so that they have an immediate and demonstrable impact on subsequent practice.

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

Christine Raeside

Her Majesty’s Inspector

cc Chair of the Governing Body
 The Academies Advisers Unit, DfE [colin.diamond@education.gsi.gov.uk]