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8 February 2013

Mrs H Ingram
The Principal
The Ridge Academy
Clyde Crescent
Cheltenham
GL52 5QH

Dear Mrs Ingram

No formal designation monitoring inspection of The Ridge Academy

Following my visit to your academy on 6 and 7 February 2013, 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 monitoring inspection carried out in accordance with no formal designation procedures and conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005. The inspection was carried out because the academy's predecessor school was judged to be a school causing concern.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, the two assistant Principals, the leader of mathematics, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governing Body, a parent governor, a representative of the sponsors, and a leader from the local authority's 'virtual school' for looked after children.

Having considered all the evidence I am of the opinion that at this time the academy is making reasonable progress in raising standards for all pupils.

Context

The academy has designated places for 44 primary aged children who have statements of special educational needs for behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. It is the only specialist primary provision in Gloucestershire for this group of pupils, who travel long distances to and from school. Currently, the academy has 40 pupils on roll. Five of these joined part way through the academic year. Just over 10% of pupils are from minority ethnic groups. No pupils speak English as an

additional language. The vast majority of pupils are entitled to free academy meals. Around a fifth of pupils are looked after. The vast majority of pupils are in Years 4 to 6, with very small numbers from Years 1 to 3.

The academy is fully staffed and there have been no staff changes since September.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

From the time that the academy opened, the Principal and senior leaders set high expectations for the progress that pupils would make, the volume of work they should complete in lessons, and the standard of presentation they would aim for. This has been highly effective and the gaps in attainment between many of the academy's pupils and their peers nationally are therefore closing securely. The academy's data on pupils' progress in English and mathematics are thorough. They are based on secure assessment processes and teachers' judgements are supported well by the work in pupils' books. The data show that, since September, more than a third of pupils have made better than nationally expected progress in mathematics, and around a third have made this progress in reading and writing. The majority of the other pupils have made progress at the rate expected nationally. Those who have not have either joined the academy recently or have particularly deep-seated behavioural and emotional difficulties, which have needed close attention before they can make good academic progress.

Pupils are making significant progress in improving their behaviour. In particular, they are learning to manage their own behaviour more independently and to make good choices about how to act. The majority of pupils spend almost all their time in class, learning. Their concentration is good. During the inspection, pupils worked at a good pace, and could recall their learning from the previous day with little prompting.

The quality of teaching

The academy is very clearly focused on learning. Teaching is having a significantly positive impact on the progress that pupils are making. Teachers set high expectations and communicate these in a positive way to pupils. They constantly talk about learning rather than behaviour and pupils understand why it is important to concentrate on their work and to try their best. The classroom environments set the tone very well. They are bright, vibrant and full of learning prompts such as key subject vocabulary and mathematical symbols.

Teachers use assessment information carefully to ensure that lessons meet the different needs of each pupil. Good teamwork between teaching assistants and teachers means that a class can easily be divided into small groups, with each group receiving good quality support with their learning. Both teachers and teaching assistants are accomplished at helping pupils to interact positively with each other and to work cooperatively in groups and pairs. Teaching of social behaviours is overt

and skilful. Staff use language carefully to help pupils to remember what is expected and to understand their own actions.

Lessons are generally well paced, with a good balance of interesting and engaging activities. Pupils benefit from the combination of whole class teaching, paired work and individual work. Since September, the older pupils in particular have extended their ability to concentrate for extended periods. Planning does not always take account of this rapid improvement and sometimes in literacy and numeracy lessons pupils do not have long enough to work on their individual tasks. Appropriate individual targets are set for pupils in literacy lessons. These are displayed on desks; however, they are not written in a way that pupils can understand which undermines their usefulness in helping pupils to become more independent.

The strong focus that leaders have placed on writing and mathematics has had a good impact on the quality of the teaching and the breadth of the curriculum in these areas. A range of interesting topics, such as 'We shall remember', stimulate pupils' imaginations and help them to acquire new skills and knowledge. Topic work is linked well to other curriculum areas, such as physical education. The systematic teaching of reading has not been as strong a focus and leaders recognise that this is now a priority.

As pupils in Years 1 and 2 have joined the academy, leaders have become aware of need to adapt the curriculum further to take into account their specific needs. This work has begun but is at an early stage of development.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

In every class, pupils take pride in their work. Their well-presented books and the work on their walls and in the corridors are clear indications of their positive attitudes to learning. In the lessons observed during the inspection, pupils showed sustained concentration on their work and, in many cases, great enthusiasm. Daily routines are clear and very well established. At the end of the morning 'wake and shake' session, for example, pupils immediately lined up in their class groups and quietly followed their teacher to the classroom. At lunchtime in the hall, pupils ate calmly and chatted to each other and staff.

For the majority of the time, pupils interact well with each other and with staff. When pupils find this difficult, staff calmly remind them of the expectations. The 'mentor' system, denoted by wearing a green sweatshirt, recognises pupils who have shown good behaviour over time, and are able to take on more responsibility. Some of the more mature pupils have learnt to support other pupils when they are upset and do so sensitively.

The academy's analysis of behaviour incidents is very thorough. Leaders have used this information well to make changes to the academy day in order to improve behaviour. For example, some pupils now eat lunch in a small group, which has improved their behaviour at lunchtime. The start of the day has been changed to

allow pupils some quiet, calm time in the classroom before lessons begin, to allow them to relax after their long journeys to school. These strategies have helped to improve behaviour since September.

Between September and February rates of exclusion have fallen. The majority of pupils have not been excluded at all. Leaders think carefully about whether exclusion is the right response to an incident and know that minimising its use remains a priority for further improvement.

The majority of pupils' attendance is at least at the national average for primary schools and for some it is above. The academy takes suitable action when attendance is low but is not always quick enough to act when previously good attendance starts to drop.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The Principal has provided the academy with good, determined leadership from the outset. She sets high standards for both staff and pupils' work and communicates these clearly. The assistant Principals are taking firm leadership of their areas. This has resulted in improvements in the management of behaviour and in the curriculum since September. The staff are a dedicated and cohesive team. They all understand their vital role in promoting learning and are very willing to support each other in managing challenging situations.

Senior leaders have an accurate picture of the academy's strengths and the areas that need to develop further. Good systems for tracking and analysing all key aspects of the academy's work enable leaders to notice quickly where any weaknesses lie and take measured action to put these right.

Communication with parents is constantly improving. The academy has communicated well with individual parents about their children from the outset. Parents are coming into the academy increasingly frequently and in greater numbers for positive events such as parents' evenings, assemblies and the Christmas concert. Pupils are taking a full part in the assemblies, which are well received. Parents' views of the academy, shown through a recent questionnaire, are positive.

A new Chair of the Governing Body and a number of new governors were appointed near the end of last term. The governing body has organised itself into a number of committees. This enables the governors to scrutinise closely all the main areas of the academy's work, and to share leadership more widely. Importantly, the committees report to the main governing body on the areas that they oversee. Governors have a range of useful skills and, although not all of them are familiar with specialist settings of this type, they are very quickly increasing their knowledge. They are highly aware of the importance of staff's as well as pupils' welfare, and have already discussed positive ideas to help to ensure staff's well-being.

Because the academy's pupils all have a statement of special educational needs and a number are looked after, the academy still has considerable involvement with the local authority. The way in which the academy, the sponsor and the local authority should interact, and their relative responsibilities, have not been fully worked out and are not clear. This sometimes leads to difficulties for the academy.

Good practical support, such as assisting with the appointment of governors, is provided by the academy's sponsor. The sponsor has also supported the academy with a number of funding needs.

External support

The academy has received support from consultants provided by the sponsor for mathematics and for English. The support for mathematics has been particularly useful in helping the new subject leader to implement his plans thoroughly and at a suitable pace. The academy receives good support from the local authority's 'virtual school' for looked after children.

Priorities for further improvement

- Develop an effective approach to the teaching of reading, including a systematic phonics programme.
- Develop a more suitable curriculum, drawing on aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, for the youngest pupils.
- Maximise the amount of time that pupils spend learning by:
 - tackling drops in good attendance more quickly and helping parents to understand the importance of attendance
 - minimising the use of exclusion.
- Agree suitable protocols for the way in which the academy, the sponsor and the local authority should work together.

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 published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sue Morris-King
Her Majesty's Inspector