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Mr Matthew Gauthier
Principal
Samuel Ryder Academy
Drakes Drive
St Albans
AL1 5AR

Dear Mr Gauthier

No formal designation monitoring inspection of Samuel Ryder Academy

Following my visit with Paul Brooker Her Majesty's Inspector to your academy on 27 and 28 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 and scrutinised documents including the academy's plans for improvement, self-evaluation document and information on pupils' attainment and progress. Inspectors visited 21 part-lessons, including small group sessions in the Early Years Foundation Stage which involved teaching letters and sounds they make (phonics). Meetings were held with the Principal, senior leaders and other members of staff, the Chair of the Governing Board and Principal of the sponsor academy. They met with four groups of pupils as well as speaking to them in lessons and at break times. A meeting of parents and carers of children in the Reception class was observed.

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 Samuel Ryder Academy opened in September 2012 following the closure of Francis Bacon School. The academy is sponsored by the Sir John Lawes Academies Trust. There are currently 345 pupils on roll; 53 in Reception and the remainder in Years 7 to 13, which reflects the development of the academy as a provider of all-through education. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds or who speak English as an additional language is above average. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs who are supported through school action plus or with a statement of special educational needs is average; an above average proportion is supported by school action. The proportion of pupils who are known to be eligible for free school meals is high. There has been very little movement of pupils into or out of the academy since it opened.

The current Principal started in January 2012, initially as acting headteacher of the predecessor school. The senior leadership team includes a deputy headteacher from the predecessor school, a deputy headteacher shared with the sponsor academy, and a deputy headteacher and two assistant headteachers appointed from outside. The academy opened with a full complement of staff and there have been no problems with recruitment; around a third of teaching staff joined the academy when it opened, together with a new head of mathematics and an inclusion coordinator.

Achievement of pupils at the academy

Most children start in Reception with levels of learning and development that are expected for their age. The academy's assessments indicate that virtually all pupils are making at least the progress they should, including in their reading, writing and mathematics. Regular diagnosis of their needs, flexible curriculum approaches, strong parental involvement and focused teaching are contributory factors.

Pupils join the academy in Year 7 with low attainment. Attainment at the predecessor school was lower than that nationally and in 2012 the gap remained similar to the previous year. However, the proportion of Year 11 pupils achieving at least five A* to C GCSE grades including English and mathematics, at 45%, met the government's floor standards. The academy's assessment information shows that a higher proportion of pupils are progressing well and at least 53% of Year 11 are on track to attain five A* to C GCSE grades or more, including English and mathematics. Key to these improvements is better teaching, intervention and additional support in mathematics where pupils' attainment is rising but is still below that nationally, and behind that in English. Inconsistent rates of progress between subjects remain. For example, pupils make better progress and attain higher standards in science than in arts and humanities subjects.

When the academy opened, progress in the sixth form was generally in line with that found nationally with notable strengths in media. Current data indicates a rise in the proportion of pupils whose current work is higher grade.

Progress between different groups of pupils varies. Pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium (additional government funding to support the achievement of pupils who are entitled to free school meals, who are in local authority care or whose parents are in the armed forces) do less well than other pupils. When the academy opened, the gap reflected that found nationally. However, the gap is now closing, particularly quickly in Year 10. This is also evident for pupils who have special educational needs and pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds. The proportion of pupils making above-average progress is low; more-able pupils do not yet reach the targets set for this group. Steps have been taken to ensure that pupils' special educational needs are more accurately defined so that additional support can be provided. However, visits to lessons confirm that teaching does not always promote equal progress for all pupils by taking account of their diverse needs when planning lessons and preparing activities. This includes challenge for more-able pupils.

The quality of teaching

There have been clear improvements in the quality of teaching across the academy. The successful focus on improving pupils' behaviour has created a better environment for teaching and learning. Classroom displays contribute because guidance about success criteria in the subject, particularly when supported by examples of other pupils' good quality work, help to make expectations clear. In a Year 7 mathematics lesson, pupils' understanding deepened further when the teacher used real-life examples to show the usefulness of working out percentages quickly. Teachers use computer technology confidently; this is most effective when pupils are engaged through interactive use of whiteboards and I-pods, for example in music. Relationships between staff and pupils are mutually supportive in most lessons. A growing proportion of enthusiastic teachers, keen to widen their repertoire, are learning from others through staff training and initiatives such as: 'little gems' shared at staff briefings; focused 'teaching and learning lunches'; and assignments developed with other schools through the 'Herts Cambs' professional development network.

Inconsistencies in the quality of teaching remain, sometimes within lessons. For example, lessons that are delivered well to the whole class but which are not backed-up by activities designed to address the needs of individuals or groups at a similar stage of learning. Inconsistencies between subjects include the quality of marking. Although staff are applying the academy's marking policy of feeding back what went well, not enough demonstrate good subject knowledge by giving pupils specific guidance about how to improve their work. Good practice in marking in English and science is helping to accelerate pupils' progress. A recent academy training event for secondary specialists rightly focused on how teachers in the Early Years Foundation Stage are using regular diagnosis of pupils' progress to structure their learning, through teacher-led and independent activities. This is also a feature

of the best teaching in the sixth form. Across the academy, additional support for disabled pupils and those with special educational needs helps them to learn as quickly as others. However, challenges for more-able pupils are too uncommon or optional. The academy has greatly improved the range of information and data available to staff but not enough are using assessment to ensure that all pupils make the progress needed to make up for underachievement in the past.

Behaviour and safety of pupils

Pupils are courteous to each other and respectful to visitors. In discussion they expressed strongly supportive views about improvements in behaviour since the academy opened. Pupils' positive attitudes to learning are reflected in their punctuality, improved attendance and participation in optional activities that include extra English and mathematics. They evaluate their own progress critically and that of their peers sensitively when shown how to, or are invited to through teachers' questioning. Similarly, their ability to demonstrate learning skills, such as collaboration or independence, depends on the opportunities provided by different teachers. In a small proportion of lessons, most often in Year 8, pupils' attitudes to learning and listening in particular are not positive enough to compensate for less inspiring teaching. However, pupils and their parents and carers rightly have confidence in the management of behaviour overall. The academy has become a more popular choice in the locality, including the sixth form.

The development of pupils' leadership roles outside of lessons is progressing well. The academy cabinet and pupil parliament are well focused on improvement issues: pupil learning; pupil support; community cohesion. The new house system and pupil mentoring contribute to pupils feeling part of a safe and supportive community. Older pupils show responsibility towards younger ones, including those in the Reception classes. Pupils indicated a wide understanding of different forms of bullying, and said that incidents are rare and are resolved effectively. They valued the opportunity to reflect on and promote anti-bullying at a recent academy conference. For the small minority of pupils who find it difficult to meet expectations of behaviour, effective arrangements have been made to ensure that there is less need for exclusions. More rewards and a revised detention system contribute positively.

The quality of leadership in and management of the academy

The Principal, in partnership with the governing board and sponsors, has established a clear vision for the growth and development of the academy. The senior team share a strong commitment to improvement, supported by effective teamwork and complementary roles and responsibilities. Regular involvement of pupils, and their parents and carers, contributes to their shared sense of purpose and pride in the academy. The 32 parents and carers who responded to Parent View all said they would recommend the academy to others. The well-attended 'coffee morning' review for parents and carers of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage showed that a new aspect of provision has started well through strong partnerships and passionate

leadership. Attendance at consultation evenings for parents and carers has increased for all year groups. The academy's specialism in new technologies is helping to keep parents and carers informed and involved.

The academy has accurately identified the most important priorities for further improvement. Targets are suitably challenging and are appropriately focused on pupils' progress. Self-evaluation is well-informed through a range of strategies that include lesson observations, unannounced learning walks, scrutiny of pupils' work and results, and more recently subject reviews. A more robust system for managing the performance of staff has been introduced. Effective links with the sponsor academy ensure that monitoring and evaluation is informed by best practice beyond Samuel Ryder. Nevertheless, some unevenness in the quality of middle leadership reflects variable clarity about what constitutes high quality teaching and learning specific to the subject. This limits the sharpness of middle leaders' improvement plans, their contribution to monitoring and evaluation and their impact on raising standards in the subject rapidly.

New approaches, policies and procedures are helping to move the academy forward. However, the interpretation and application of academy-wide change is inconsistent. For example, improvements in curriculum provision since the academy opened are not always reflected in more stimulating curriculum content in the classroom. Nevertheless, the increasing evidence of good practice provides a secure foundation upon which to build.

External support

The academy has received effective support from the trust. This includes a deputy headteacher shared between the two academies and the appointment of key staff with high aspirations for Samuel Ryder Academy. Links between the academies are used judiciously, for example to strengthen the development of the sixth form. The governing board shows strong commitment to raising standards, contributes to the clear strategic direction of the academy, and is sufficiently well-informed to support and challenge future developments. A mathematics consultant from the local authority has provided advice and support for the new head of mathematics.

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the proportion of teaching that is consistently good and outstanding by:
 - ensuring that all teachers use their knowledge of individual pupils to prepare a range of activities and approaches that meet their needs, including the more-able pupils
 - ensuring that all pupils receive clear and constructive subject-specific feedback about how to improve their work.

- Accelerate progress and raise attainment in all subjects, including to national standards in mathematics.
- Develop the effectiveness of middle leaders, in particular their role in interpreting, implementing and embedding all policies and procedures.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector