



23 February 2007

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Dear Mrs Haddock

ACADEMIES INITIATIVE: MONITORING VISIT TO SALFORD CITY ACADEMY

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 21 and 22 February 2007, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector to confirm the inspection findings.

The visit was a first monitoring visit in connection with the academies initiative.

This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website. Please inform the Regional Inspection Service Provider of any factual inaccuracies within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter.

Evidence

I observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, the vice principals, the subject leaders of English, mathematics and science, a group of students from the student council, and the chair of governors. I observed nine lessons and briefly visited the 'reflection zone', the Year 11 careers day and some enrichment activities.

Context

The academy opened in September 2005, housed in the buildings of the predecessor school. Almost all of the staff and students transferred from that school to the academy. Since then there have been a number of staffing changes; nearly half of the teachers have joined the academy in the last two years. The academy is fully staffed. In September 2006, the academy moved into new buildings which were built on the site of the playing fields. Some of the old buildings have recently been demolished to make way for more outdoor physical education facilities. The remainder are being refurbished to house the sixth form which the academy plans to open in September 2007.

There are 579 students aged 11 to 16 years on roll. Although the numbers of boys and girls are roughly equal overall, there is a gender imbalance in some year groups, most marked in Years 7 and 9. More students than is typical are joining the academy at times other than at the start of Year 7, and increasingly so this year. About 5% of students are of minority ethnic heritage; 12 students are in the early stages of learning to speak English. An above average proportion of the students, 28%, have learning difficulties and/or disabilities; four students have statements of special educational need. The academy serves a community that experiences significant social and economic disadvantage; a third of the students have free school meals, which is about double the national average.

The academy's ethos is Christian; its sponsors are the United Learning Trust (ULT) and the Diocese of Manchester. Its curricular specialism is sports but, in common with other ULT academies, it also has a strong focus on business and enterprise. The academy has continued with the predecessor school's designation as a training school. It has been awarded the Inclusion Quality Mark and Healthy School status.

Achievement and standards

Students in Years 7 and 8 joined the academy having achieved below average standards in national Key Stage 2 tests. The most able cohort is currently in Year 8. Those students who transferred from the predecessor school had well below average prior attainment, although there was evidence of a rising trend. In Year 11 in 2006, there were many more boys than girls, and the boys had particularly weak English results at Key Stage 2 in 2001.

The academy's first set of results from national Key Stage 3 tests in English, mathematics and science were broadly in line with its challenging targets for students' performance at Level 5, the standard expected of students aged 14 years. The middle-ability students made good progress and the lower-ability satisfactory progress. Performance at Level 6 and higher was uneven; the target was met in mathematics, was missed in science and fell well short in English. The academy's analysis rightly raises questions about the weak performance of the more able girls in all three subjects and of the more able boys in English.

At GCSE, 50% of the students gained five or more A* to C grades but just over a half of these, 27% of the cohort, included English and mathematics, which was in line with the academy's target. Students' results in several subjects, including GNVQ information and communication technology (ICT), boosted the performance at the five A* to C measure, and contributed significantly to these students' good overall achievement, especially the girls. Few, however, attained the highest A/A* grades. A target group of 18 students, mentored by members of the senior leadership team, achieved well.

Nearly four fifths of the students attained five or more A* to G grades including English and mathematics, which fell short of the academy's challenging target but nevertheless represents satisfactory progress. While most students gained at least

one qualification, 10% did not. Poor attendance was the principal factor in this; 15 students were persistent non-attenders.

The academy's analysis of results in both key stages shows a clear grasp of where the notable successes are and what could or should be improved. Action has swiftly been taken to tackle issues; for example, the range of qualifications in ICT has been broadened to meet students' needs and abilities better. Attention is currently focused on ensuring that the most able students are suitably challenged in their day-to-day learning: coordinators have recently been appointed to lead work on improving provision for gifted and talented students. Plans to develop a system for tracking students' progress against their targets might sensibly be aligned with a drive to improve the accuracy of teachers' assessment and students' involvement in gauging their progress. The school's data from practice examinations show early signs of promise for 2007.

Personal development and well-being

Students' behaviour was at least satisfactory and often good in the lessons observed. Students were generally attentive and willingly complied with their teachers' instructions even when they found some of the work dull. They collaborated well when provided with carefully structured opportunities to work in small groups. Relationships with staff and with each other were good; humour was a positive feature of several lessons.

Around the academy, students behaved sensibly, even in busy bottlenecks at the end of break, for example. They treat the new accommodation with respect and appreciate the quality of resources provided. Students are friendly and are keen to talk about their academy, offering views, for example, on the dinner rota, the pros and cons of the house system, and the under-use of house points to acknowledge good work. Students take responsibilities seriously, whether acting as peer mentors, prefects, or school councillors.

Last year, the academy introduced the 'reflection zone', a system for tackling behaviours that would previously have led to fixed-term exclusion. The zone is well managed, with clearly defined procedures and reintegration strategies. Its introduction has radically reduced the number of fixed-term exclusions. There is, however, a need to explore in greater depth the effectiveness of the zone on those students who have repeated placements there.

Attendance has improved. To date, it stands at 91%, a rise of three percentage points on the figure for 2005/06. The rate of unauthorised absence has fallen, although it remains above average. The academy makes very good use of a robust and coherent set of strategies to optimise attendance which include the work of the inclusion teaching assistant and the family support worker. The academy reports an improvement in punctuality since September. However, on the second day of the inspection, 55 students arrived late.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning varied widely; it was good or outstanding in five of the nine lessons and satisfactory in three, one of which was only just adequate. Most teachers were enthusiastic and had good relationships with students which allowed unobtrusive management of behaviour. A few chose innovative and interesting approaches to learning. Characteristics of the best teaching included clear learning objectives that were discussed with students in a meaningful way and skilful questioning to check students' understanding, supplemented by rephrasing and follow-up questions to pursue learning further. Carefully sequenced activities ensured that students made rapid progress. In these lessons, learning was fun and students tried hard to meet teachers' high expectations of them.

Areas of inconsistency in the teaching include marking which varies in its frequency and usefulness. Not all teachers start lessons by checking how much students know already, and this slows the pace of learning. Some students' books show that their progress over time is insecure. The academy has accurately identified a need for teachers to develop further the use of assessment information to promote learning and to match teaching to the range of needs within a class. In addition, the academy should seek to strengthen the effectiveness of plenary sessions. Teaching assistants often worked well with students on a one-to-one basis but they were not deployed effectively during whole-class teaching. Teachers' planning did not indicate how materials or activities should be modified to meet individual students' learning needs.

The academy has an appropriately rigorous programme of lesson observation, coupled with programmes of support for individual teachers and whole-academy foci for development. Records of monitoring track clear improvement in the quality of teaching over the last 18 months. However, some lesson observation records do not fully substantiate the grades awarded and this has led to a slightly rosy view of the overall quality of teaching and learning. There is scope to sharpen the attention paid to students' progress within lessons and over time.

Senior staff understand the relationship between the curriculum that students experience and their achievement, and how providing the right curriculum is key to ensuring that all students' needs are met and that the academy is truly inclusive. A current focus has been on improving option choices for lower-ability students. At Key Stage 4, the range of courses and types of qualifications are being extended, particularly vocational options, some of which include off-site provision. Twelve students who might otherwise have been vulnerable to leaving without qualifications are studying a life skills course. Some Year 7 students benefit from being in the 'foundation group' where they are taught predominantly by one teacher. These students blossom and are successfully integrated into classes with their peers in Year 8.

Curricular initiatives under discussion include a two-year Key Stage 3 and 'fast-tracking' at GCSE. Careful consideration needs to be given to curricular continuity, particularly at age 16, should such pathways be adopted. Other work relates to

national 14–19 developments in functional skills and specialised diplomas. The academy has rightly identified that the role of its specialist subject is in the early stages of contributing to the wider work of the academy and the local community.

Planning for the sixth form is broadly on schedule. The academy is aware of the need to ensure that staff have enough time and relevant training opportunities in preparation for meeting the demands of sixth form teaching but current plans place insufficient emphasis on this dimension.

There is a need to review the effectiveness of arrangements for grouping students. Currently, students are placed in ability sets for groups of subjects. In Years 9 to 11, this is within an upper and lower band, whereas in Years 7 and 8 the bands are of parallel ability, an arrangement that more closely reflects the academy's inclusive ethos. It is not known to what extent the arrangements inhibit or promote students' achievement and their self-esteem.

Extra-curricular activities are a strength of the academy and make a positive contribution to students' personal development. A wide range of staff and regular visitors provide students with the weekly 'enrichment afternoon' – a wide range of activities including drama, skiing, trampolining, cooking, and a pre-driving course. Students change activities every few weeks. The academy has introduced a broad programme of visits in this country and abroad which are much appreciated by the students. Initiatives such as 'super learning days' enrich learning in citizenship, business and enterprise and religious studies.

The academy is keen to develop a distinctive and vibrant curriculum to meet the needs of the students now and in the future. In the light of the number of curricular developments underway or being considered, it would be timely to reflect on the manageability of the cumulative impact of such a level of change.

Leadership and management

The principal provides clear educational direction to the work and development of the academy. She manages change effectively: planning in the academy's first year was sensibly short term. Now, a three-year development plan and a longer-term strategic plan set out a clear vision for the academy's future. Strategic leadership is good.

Management systems and procedures are clearly defined and rigorously implemented: this underpins the academy's capacity to improve. Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities, and there is some effective teamwork, for example in the collaborative planning sessions and in sharing good practice. Staff morale is buoyant; they know that good work is given recognition. Equally, they know that persistent underperformance will be tackled. The principal is well supported by a team of four vice-principals and an assistant principal, each of whom carries whole-academy responsibilities. They are equipped with generally good managerial skills but some bring greater insight to their leadership roles than others.

The quality of middle-level leadership and management varies considerably but with some notable strengths. The systems used by middle-level leaders for monitoring their areas of responsibility are well established, although a more questioning approach that links evaluation of outcomes to classroom practice might prove beneficial. The process of annual review informs department development planning appropriately. While most plans follow a common format, they vary in quality. In particular, some confuse aims, actions, impact and success criteria, many of which are not quantitative. Line management by senior staff is well received and largely effective but would benefit from minor refinements, for instance by checking progress against development plans on a regular basis, and ensuring that minutes of meetings include clear action points.

The governing body was constituted in autumn 2005. Many governors were new to the role. Currently they provide committed support for the academy but are not yet fully equipped to provide the level of challenge required to help raise the academy's performance. The chair is well informed about the academy's work and has a clear vision of how the role of the governors should develop, particularly in relation to the curriculum and standards.

The academy provides a bright and welcoming environment for learning. At work, the ethos is orderly and purposeful. Resources are well deployed. Good use is made of additional adults, particularly in the range of ways they have been assigned specific responsibilities or have developed particular expertise. There are robust systems to ensure that students are very well cared for; the academy works in effective partnership with external agencies.

External support

The academy has useful links with a number of other organisations within the local community and the diocese of Manchester, and through the family of ULT schools and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. It has also retained some productive links with the local authority. The academy's designation as a training school has had a positive impact on recruitment. While links with local businesses are fruitful, the academy has identified that there is a need for clearer definition of the contribution such partnerships make to students' learning and development.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- continue to raise standards, paying particular attention to ensuring appropriate challenge
- hone teachers' use of assessment in their day-to-day work
- bring a strategic overview to the wide range of curricular initiatives and developments
- refine the forward planning for the sixth form

- continue to develop and bring greater consistency to the quality of middle-level leadership and management
- develop further the role of governors.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors, the diocese of Manchester, and the Academies Group at the DfES.

Yours sincerely

Jane Jones
HM Inspector of Schools