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Mr Andy Halpin
Principal
Harris Academy Merton
Wide Way
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Dear Mr Halpin

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Harris Academy Merton

Introduction

Following my visit with Robert Lovett, HMI, to your academy on 16 and 17 October 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

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents, met with the principal, other members of the leadership team, middle managers, groups of students, and the chief executive of the federation.

Context

The academy was designated for an accelerated opening in September 2006. It is part of a hard federation with five other Harris academies in south east London, and it specialises in enterprise and sport. There is a 10 place Language Base funded by the local authority, and it hosts Merton's School Sports Partnership. Due to the delay in confirming the opening date, caused by a Judicial Review, appointments to some management posts did not take place until well into the first academic year. The academy is currently fully staffed, except for a vacancy for the co-ordinator of religious studies.

There are 685 students on roll, including 12 in the newly opened sixth form, and the academy is over-subscribed in Year 7. About one third of students are from White

British backgrounds and about two-fifths are of Black heritage; very few are at the early stages of learning English. About a quarter of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities, which is above the national average. The academy serves a community that experiences significant socio-economic deprivation; almost a third of students are eligible to claim free school meals, nearly three times the national average.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory. Standards attained in national tests in 2007 at both Key Stages 3 and 4 were exceptionally low. Unvalidated data made available during the visit indicate that this was broadly average achievement, given the students' starting points. Evidence from this visit, including lesson observations and work seen in students' books, supports this judgement. Standards remain low, but the progress that students make is satisfactory and improving.

Students start in Year 7 with levels of attainment well below those found nationally. The academy judges standards to be exceptionally low. The results from national examinations and inspection evidence agree with this view. However, the academy also judges achievement to be inadequate, but this is too harsh a judgement. At Key Stage 3, results in English improved significantly in 2007 and were similar to those found nationally; whilst mathematics and science results remain well below national figures they are beginning to show an upward trend. The numbers of students attaining 5 A*-Cs at GCSE in 2007 was well below the national figure, but above the academy's agreed targets. All other available data demonstrate that the students in Year 11 made satisfactory progress in 2007. The academy was able to provide convincing evidence that students are on currently on track to meet their targets in 2008. If this is achieved standards would be broadly average and achievement would be good.

Personal development and well-being

Behaviour has improved significantly since the academy opened, and it has made good progress in improving attitudes to learning. The number of students subject to fixed term exclusions remains high and is partly a result of the principal's 'zero tolerance' attitude to poor behaviour. Students understand this and believe that the policy is applied fairly and justly. Only one student has been permanently excluded since the academy opened. Whilst the high level of exclusions indicates continuing unacceptable behaviour by a minority of students, most behave well and in lessons observed behaviour was generally good. Behaviour in corridors and around the academy is consistently good.

The recently introduced policy on attendance has already resulted in significant improvement so that it is now satisfactory. Students say they are safe and well cared for. The on-site Safer School Partnership Officer not only makes a significant contribution to this, but is highly valued by staff and students as an important member of the community. Students are given opportunities to make a positive contribution to ensuring their own safety through, for example, carrying out risk

assessments for visits, and assuming the role of 'safety officer' in science investigations.

Students are particularly complimentary about recent changes to the academy's uniform policy, improvements to resources, and the refurbishment of the buildings. The academy buildings and site are maintained to a very high standard and are kept litter free, indicating that students take a real pride in their surroundings. Assemblies make a valuable contribution to reinforcing the academy ethos of personal responsibility and achievement, and contribute well to the spiritual development of students.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory. During the visit nine lessons were observed: one was outstanding, three were good and five were satisfactory. The academy has put in place rigorous and regular lesson observations by members of the senior leadership team and subject coordinators. Teachers say they find these observations, and the resulting professional development, a valuable experience. Improvements in behaviour have resulted in a better learning environment, so that students can make faster progress. Good teaching is characterised by a brisk pace, appropriate use of assessment and a variety of teaching techniques. Satisfactory lessons lack sufficient variety, excitement, or the sheer fun of learning; the pace is pedestrian and students are not given sufficient opportunities to contribute or to work together. The potential for improvement was demonstrated by an outstanding science lesson with a group of lower ability Year 11 students. The teacher used a range of methods to engage all students and because the lesson was very enjoyable they worked hard and made outstanding progress. The academy is committed to improving the quality of teaching and learning. The vice principal responsible for this area has a good understanding of how to ensure that this happens quickly.

The curriculum meets the needs of students. Sport, one of the academy's specialisms, plays a significant part in the provision of out-of-school-hours clubs and staff show real commitment to running these. Attendance by students is currently lower than the academy would like. Sport is having a positive impact in raising self-esteem and encouraging a sense of community. The academy has ensured an appropriate curriculum focus on English and mathematics in order to raise standards further. Students report a significant increase in opportunities to take part in educational visits. They really value this as a clear sign that the academy trusts them.

Students are well cared for. Their planners are used consistently to support learning, report pastoral concerns and record achievement. Work is regularly marked and makes good reference to levels and grade descriptors. Students generally know their current levels and what they need to do to make progress. Assemblies are used very well to provide wider recognition of students' achievement. Students are very appreciative of the balance and fairness of the rewards and sanctions system.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good, and demonstrate outstanding capacity for further improvement. Given the compressed timescale to prepare for academy status, the improvement in one year is impressive. The principal has very high standards and is relentless in his drive to ensure consistency in routines, particularly around behaviour. He has made a number of shrewd appointments, and has had the confidence to wait to find the right people. He is extremely well supported by both vice principals, one of whom is a very recent appointment. Students hold the vice principal responsible for discipline in high regard. They are right to do so. Senior leaders have an astute awareness of their own relative strengths and complement each other very well. They are unafraid to identify weaknesses and do not shirk from challenging poor practice, but do so in a supportive way. Students express strong support for, and a belief in, the values and direction of the academy.

The quality of self-evaluation is generally accurate and the outcomes effectively used to improve the academy. However, the academy's view of student achievement is too harsh. This is partly a reflection of very high expectations, but also because the academy does not yet make a secure distinction between standards and achievement. As a result, middle managers do not have a consistently accurate view of the progress of their students. The academy acknowledges this, and is rightly confident that the systems and routines already in place will enable them to quickly address this.

Improvement planning focuses very effectively on the key targets and sets out appropriate actions and success criteria. However, it does not consistently show who is accountable or how success will be evaluated.

External support

The academy benefits greatly from the federation arrangements. It has made good use of the available expertise in making appointments and taken advantage of opportunities provided for staff training. There are good plans to extend this by facilitating greater joint working across subject areas during the coming year.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Interpret data on student achievement more accurately
- The quality of teaching, so that it fully capitalises on improvements to student behaviour
- Reduce the number of fixed term exclusions.

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

Yours sincerely

Michael Lynes

Michael Lynes
HM Inspector of Schools