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Mrs Alison Banks
Principal
Westminster Academy
Harrow Road
London
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Dear Mrs Banks

Academies Initiative: Monitoring Visit to Westminster Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Christopher Russell HMI and Peter Gale HMI to your academy on 18 and 19 June 2008, 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 and met with the principal, vice principals and assistant vice principals, other members of staff, groups of students and representatives of the sponsors.

Context

Westminster Academy has specialist status for International Business and Enterprise. It is one of two academies that replaced a large comprehensive school. It opened in September 2006 in premises that were part of the predecessor school, but which were not designed to accommodate the number of students on the academy's roll. Most of the 800 students and staff came from the predecessor school. While there has been a substantial turnover of teaching staff since then, the student population has remained relatively stable. The academy's students come from a wide range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, including many who are from families seeking asylum or who have refugee status. The proportion entitled to free school meals is well above the national average. Many students speak English as well as another language at home and a high number have difficulties with their learning or

behaviour. Attainment on entry to the academy is below average. The prior attainment of students who started in Key Stage 4 in 2006 was exceptionally low.

In September 2007, the academy moved to its purpose-built premises. Sixth-form provision began at that time; there are currently 55 students on roll in the sixth form.

Achievement and standards

In 2007, the results of national tests for students in Year 9 were well below national averages overall. Although standards in English were below average, the students had made good progress from their starting points in Year 7. In contrast, standards were very low in mathematics and science.

At the end of Key Stage 4 in 2007, standards were well below the national average; only 17% of students achieved five good GCSE passes, including English and mathematics. The students did not make sufficient progress overall during Key Stage 4. Again, the students made much better progress in English than they did in mathematics.

The academy's systems for tracking and monitoring the students' achievement are at a relatively early stage of development. The students' attainment and progress are checked at regular intervals through the year. Information is collected in a centralised database. However, teachers' assessments of students' current attainment are not yet consistently accurate. This limits the extent to which the data can be used to target teaching and individual support to meet the precise academic needs of each student.

There is limited evidence to indicate that examination results will rise this year. However, students are now making satisfactory progress in lessons. There are some signs of improvements, for example, Year 10 students' module examination results in chemistry and biology indicate that they are making significantly greater progress in science than in previous years.

Progress in the sixth form is inconsistent between different subjects and between individual students on the same course. This is because of a combination of variable teaching quality, inconsistent academic guidance and the low attendance of some students. Standards in the sixth form are very low.

Personal development and well-being

The academy has worked hard to improve students' behaviour, with some success. Students generally behave acceptably in lessons and around the site. However, there are still incidents of low-level disruption in lessons and boisterous behaviour during lesson changeover. Students know about healthy eating. They are proud of their 'sky dining' area which offers an excellent choice of healthy food as well as a superb view across London. There are many extra-curricular sporting activities for students to choose from. However, the removal of physical education from the core curriculum in Key Stage 4 means that some students, particularly girls, take part in little physical

activity at school. Students report that they feel safe in the academy and that there is very little bullying.

Attendance levels have been very low but are showing signs of improvement, particularly among younger students. However, too many students fail to attend lessons in the sixth form and those that do have a relaxed attitude to timekeeping. Problems with the accuracy of attendance data have caused difficulties with tracking and intervening to address this issue. Generally, students are positive about the academy and appreciate the efforts their teachers are making to bolster their achievement. The new house system is beginning to embed and develop strong pastoral care. Individual needs are well known and house staff use internal systems and external agencies well to support students and, where required, their parents.

Quality of provision

In the majority of lessons during this inspection, the quality of teaching was satisfactory. In about one third of the lessons, the teaching was good. This is a considerable improvement since the academy opened, but it is still not good enough to ensure that students make progress at the rate they should in order to make up for past underachievement. There are growing strengths in teaching, but there is too much variation in some aspects. In those lessons where teaching is good, students are challenged because expectations of what they should achieve are suitably high and the pace of learning is brisk. However, activities are too often uninspiring and passively received by the students. Generally, insufficient attention is given to matching activities closely to what the students need to learn next, based on accurate assessments of their current attainment. The quality of lesson planning varies; at best it is thorough and supports learning well. Weaknesses in planning include objectives for the students' learning that are too broad, and a lack of clarity about exactly what the students should have achieved by the end of the lesson. In some lessons, teachers and teaching assistants are not vigilant enough to ensure that all of the students, although compliant, are actually working on the tasks that they have been set. Teachers frequently make sure in lessons that the students know what they need to do in order to produce work of a certain level or grade. However, the guidance is generic and not tailored to individual students' needs. Target-setting for individuals is not yet based on accurate assessments of their current attainment and the rate at which they are capable of making progress.

The good improvements in students' behaviour have led to a better climate for learning in lessons. However, the students are clearly unused to being active participants in learning and are often passive recipients of information rather than enthusiastic seekers of knowledge. Many find sustaining concentration difficult. There are still a few lessons where the behaviour of a few interferes with the learning of others. These factors hinder progress.

The academy has adopted a thematic or 'topic' approach to the curriculum in Key Stage 3. Its aim is to make learning more relevant and to help students develop key skills. Revisions are planned for the start of the next academic year as the approach is not yet fully integrated across all year groups. Other innovations include one day each week of 'internship' in local businesses for students in Year 10. The range of

courses, options and enrichment activities is much broader than in the predecessor school. However, the impact of these initiatives has not yet been evaluated in terms of the effect they have had on progress and how far they meet the students' needs. In the sixth form, some students have followed courses of study that they have found very challenging and they have become disengaged from their learning following Year 12 examinations.

The academy is planning to stop offering A-level subjects in favour of the International Baccalaureate for more able students. Other students will combine BTEC with an AS qualification.

Leadership and management

The principal and senior leadership team have robustly tackled many of the challenges they have faced since the academy opened. The impact of their work can be seen in the improvements in students' behaviour and attendance, and in the quality of teaching. Staff morale has improved, there is a sense of purpose and direction and there is a clear commitment to building on what has already been achieved. Self-evaluation is accurate and the academy's leaders honestly acknowledge that there is still a good deal of work to be done to eradicate the legacy of underachievement, to bring all teaching up to the level of the best and to further improve the students' attitudes to learning. Until recently, the academy was heavily reliant on the senior leaders to drive change forward. Heads of faculty are now beginning to play a stronger part in bringing about improvement in their own areas of responsibility, but their role is as yet inconsistent and underdeveloped.

The academy's strategic plan for 2008 – 2011 is based around five key challenges linked to the Every Child Matters agenda and the principles of the 'Opening Minds' project. It is ambitious in scope. First steps have been taken but the impact has yet to be seen in improved academic outcomes for the students.

External support

The academy makes good use of external support from a wide range of sources. Support from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust has been highly valued for the impact it has had on the staff's professional development. The academy also works closely with Westminster Local Authority and private consultants to help moderate and affirm the academy's own evaluations of the impact of steps to improve teaching and behaviour, for example.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- improve the accuracy and use of assessment information to ensure that students make the best possible progress;

- build on the improvements in the students' behaviour to help them develop positive attitudes and a thirst for learning;
- improve the quality of provision in the sixth form so that students' needs and aspirations are met.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda McGill
HM Inspector of Schools

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF