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Mrs Ruth Robinson
Principal
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Dear Mrs Robinson

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to North Oxfordshire Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Emma Ing HMI and Paul Scott HMI to your academy on 10 and 11 March 2009, 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.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, the senior leadership team, middle managers, groups of pupils, the chair of the local governing body, a governor and the project manager for the building work.

Context

The academy, specialising in Media and Communication with Business Enterprise, opened on 1 September 2007. The governing body of the academy is the Board of the United Learning Trust. A number of governance responsibilities are devolved to the local governing body. The self-evaluation form notes that composition of this group 'is being reviewed in order to make it more effective, to include more business sponsor governors and to make it more representative of the school and its community'. The sponsors are the Vodafone UK Foundation. The North Oxford Academy has been awarded Intermediate International School status and is working towards full international status by the end of the academic year. It is also poised to become a career academy in September 2009. The principal, vice-principal, three assistant principals and three senior directors form the senior leadership team. There is a full quota of suitably qualified teachers and support staff. Staffing is stable with a low turnover of personnel. Approximately one-third of the academy's staff worked



in the predecessor school. Initial difficulties in recruiting mathematics teachers have been addressed. The low turnover of staff indicates a high measure of job satisfaction and this was confirmed in interviews.

The academy is situated in the buildings of the predecessor school. A building and refurbishment programme, providing additional administrative and teaching areas and upgrading public and recreational areas, is on target to be completed by September 2009. The academy has adopted Oxfordshire's admissions policy which enables pupils in outlying rural areas to seek admission. There are 708 students on roll in Key Stages 3 and 4 and 39 in the sixth form, which opened in September 2008. These relatively low figures are projected to increase annually and applications for entry in 2008 and 2009 exceeded the places available. About one in 10 students is from a minority ethnic group. The largest group are from a Pakistani background. One in 20 students has a home language other than English. The proportion of students claiming free school meals is higher than the national average and is particularly high in Year 7 where uptake is almost a third of the cohort. The proportion of students with a statement of special educational need is considerably above the average found nationally. Almost a third of the students are included on the register of special educational needs. This is also higher than is found nationally. The largest group has moderate learning difficulties and a similar number of students experience behavioural, emotional or social difficulties. A similar proportion of students to that found nationally enters or leaves the academy at times other than the beginning of Year 7 and the end of Year 11.

Achievement and standards

The academy sets challenging targets and rigorously monitors the progress that students make towards them, offering a wide and effective range of appropriate intervention strategies to support pupils who may be slipping behind. Attainment at Key Stage 4 in 2008 was exceptionally low in mathematics and well below average overall. However, there has been significant improvement since then. Current Year 11 students are on track to achieve challenging targets and standards close to national averages. There remains a legacy of low achievement which the academy is addressing robustly. This is particularly evident in the oracy and literacy skills of students. These are below expectations at all ages, limiting the capacity of many students to tackle higher-level work successfully across much of the curriculum. The recent introduction of a commercial phonics-based reading scheme is leading to good progress in literacy in Year 7 and is rapidly improving the skills of some older Key Stage 3 students, albeit from an extremely low base.

During the first year the academy was opened, the progress made by students completing Year 11 was very poor. Progress has improved significantly for the current cohort, partly because students are being suitably prepared to take a greater number of GCSEs each but also because better progress is being made in lessons. A significant factor in the improved rate at which students are making progress is the range of very effective interventions that the academy provides when pupils fall



behind with their work. The progress made by the very few sixth form students does not yet match that being made lower down the academy. This is, in part, due to the low starting point of many of the students, particularly their underdeveloped communication and study skills. It also reflects the fact that some students are not entered for enough or for appropriate courses and that intervention strategies in Year 12 are less well targeted than in other year groups.

Personal development and well-being

The academy has introduced robust systems to improve behaviour. The student support team is most effective at helping those who are experiencing difficulties with their behaviour. Students respond well to this support and to the academy's Behaviour for Learning procedures. A significant reduction this year in the proportion of fixed-term exclusions attests to this. Older students spoke most positively about the great improvements in behaviour that they have witnessed and praised the principal's firm but fair approach to discipline. Attitudes and behaviour were largely satisfactory in lessons, in the canteen and when students were moving around the building. The extended break and lunch arrangements have resulted in a quiet and calm atmosphere throughout the day. However, the narrow stairwells can become crowded at change-over times, making it difficult to ascend or descend without bumping into others. In classes where teaching is strong, the students' attitudes and behaviour are good.

Attendance is broadly in line with that of similar-aged students nationally. The majority of students attend regularly and arrive punctually. Where attendance falls below accepted levels, the academy works assiduously with external agencies to monitor and support individual students and their families. Among other recognised strategies for reducing absence, the academy uses a range of graduated letters that keep parents well informed not only about the proportion of schooling that their children are missing but also about the legal and academic consequences of this absence. Individualised learning programmes are having a positive impact by engaging previously disaffected students.

Students are proud of what the academy has achieved so far and are looking forward to regaining access to the whole site. They appreciate the improvements to the accommodation and are taking good care of the refurbished areas. Many enjoy their physical education lessons and all are encouraged to eat healthily in the canteen. A Personal Enrichment Programme (PEP) on Thursday afternoons is particularly enjoyed by all students because it enables them to work with students in other years and encourages them to try a wide range of interesting and exciting practical activities such as salsa dancing, fishing, sailing and working in the academy's radio station. Students say that they feel happy and safe and are confident that they have access to a wide range of specialist help within the academy and from external providers. Their willingness to seek help was evident in the student reception area where many staff–student interactions were witnessed.



Quality of provision

Well-focused training and robust monitoring are increasing the consistency of teaching and learning. Most of the teaching observed during the visit was satisfactory or good. Good practice was seen in English, media, art, science and history lessons. Outstanding teaching was observed in some Year 7 classes and in intervention groups for literacy. A very small amount of unsatisfactory teaching and learning was observed. Positive aspects of teaching include consistency in planning, strong subject knowledge, a good mix of activities, paired and group work and effective use of student self-evaluation. Positive relationships encouraged students to make an extra effort and to behave appropriately. Open questioning engaged their attention and encouraged them to develop more effective thinking skills. Very effective teamwork was observed in a Year 9 media lesson. Teachers' well-honed speaking, listening and recording skills provide a good model and in several lessons there were ample opportunities for students to practise their note taking and oracy skills. This is important because learning is often inhibited by the students' inarticulacy and their subsequent difficulty in recording accurately and at speed. There were examples of excellent marking that provided students with a clear understanding of what they had achieved and of how well they are progressing towards their target grades, but this is not consistent across the academy. While much of the planning shows clear differentiation for different levels of ability, this was not evident in practice in all lessons. Some lacked sufficient challenge, while in others the material presented was too difficult, preventing students from making sufficient progress.

Care, guidance and support are led with clarity, vision and passion. Adults consistently apply excellent behaviour-management strategies. This has led to students knowing, and by and large respecting, the rules, to the extent that behaviour is now significantly improved. Behaviour issues are monitored closely, enabling leaders to identify hotspots and put in place measures to support the resolution of any longer-term difficulties. Tracking systems to monitor progress and attainment are thoroughly embedded and are very well used by teachers and leaders to give insight into students' performance and learning needs. A wide range of supplementary strategies are used in Key Stages 3 and 4 to help learners get back on track. These strategies are less well developed in the sixth form.

Students are confident that there are caring adults to whom they can turn if they need help. They know that the extremely small number of racist or bullying incidents are recorded and followed up robustly. Those who experience difficulties in managing their behaviour are extremely well supported. Consequently, they are developing a more mature approach to their school life. Several mentioned how much they appreciated the opportunities that they had been given to reflect on inappropriate responses and to develop effective strategies for the future. Students who have social, emotional or learning difficulties are identified early and strategies of increasing complexity and individualisation are put into place to support them. Well-developed communication and partnership working with external agencies



facilitate the provision of a range of services to meet their needs. For those who need it, one-to-one support is provided by key workers. The academy ensures that students in Key Stages 3 and 4 are engaged in curricula that meet their needs, aspirations and interests well, and this has enabled many individuals to re-engage with education very positively.

Consequently, the curriculum in Key Stages 3 and 4 is good, with clear pathways that are well matched to students' prior attainment. The Team 7 initiative is allowing students to make good progress from very low starting points. There is a wide range of appropriate courses available for students in Key Stage 4 and good alternative provision for students who require a more tailored curriculum to meet their needs. An early start to GCSE courses is motivating Year 9 students in their learning. The sixth form curriculum is under development and currently operates two out of the four planned pathways. Provision will expand this autumn when the International Baccalaureate will be in place. Building works are impacting on provision, particularly in specialist areas such as technology/engineering, but this is being appropriately managed by the staff.

Leadership and management

Outstanding leadership at a senior level coupled with extremely effective management have enabled the academy to make good progress. One reason for this is that priorities, based on a rigorous analysis of need, have been drawn up and are kept under continual review. Systems and procedures are well thought out, clearly articulated, understood by all and robustly monitored. A further reason is the exceptionally strong teamwork. Leaders at all levels know that they are accountable. They are passionate about the work that they do and the difference that they are making. Departments are well led and exhibit a single-minded approach to raising standards and ensuring that all students achieve to the best of their ability.

Governance works effectively at two levels. The trust board is involved at the strategic level and has overall accountability for the work of the academy. Regular, informative reports keep the trust members well informed about progress towards the academy's targets. The local governing body works closely with the principal and senior leadership team to translate general principles into action. Suitable systems are in place to enable local governors to monitor and influence planning and provision and to become familiar with the work of specific departments. Robustly monitored safeguarding procedures are in place and all requirements are met.

The academy works well with partners to ensure that it is developing provision that meets the needs of all of its students and, increasingly, those in the local area. Leaders analyse the progress of the academy thoroughly and are acute in their evaluation of strengths and areas for development. Planning for improvement is robust and sharply tied to clear, measurable targets. In consequence, outstanding capacity for improvement has been demonstrated.



External support

The academy benefits from a wide range of support and consultancy; in particular, staff have made good use of the extensive and pertinent courses and consultancy available from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- To raise attainment so that an increasing proportion of pupils achieve top grades at GCSE.
- Further develop students' communication and language skills across all subjects.
- Replicate the fast and sharply focused and effective intervention in evidence at Key Stages 3 and 4 in the sixth form in order to maximise the progress made by students.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of governors and the Academies Group at the DCSF. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Catherine Munt
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF

