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Mr Mike Reading
Oxford Academy
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Dear Mr Reading

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to Oxford Academy

Following my visit with Carmen Rodney HMI and Roger Garrett Additional Inspector, to your academy, on 14-15 October 2009, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings.

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

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the principal, other nominated staff, groups of students, and the chair of governors who is also the representative of the sponsors.

Context

The Oxford Academy opened in September 2008. It is housed partly in the same accommodation as its predecessor school and also in temporary accommodation due to the construction of new buildings on the site which is scheduled to open in January 2011.

The academy's lead sponsor is the Oxford Diocese of the Church of England. Sponsors also include the Beecroft Trust and Oxford Brookes University. It has subject specialisms in mathematics, information and communication technology (ICT), and sports.

There are currently 774 students aged 11 to 18 years on roll. The area served by the academy is one of significant social and economic disadvantage. The academy's immediate catchment area is supported by the Oxford City Council's plan for regeneration. A large majority of students are from amongst the most deprived wards in the country. 20% of students are eligible for free school meals. 41% of the students are identified as having special educational needs and/or disabilities which is well above average although the proportion of students with a statement of educational need is below average. The academy has significant involvement with local parents and has secured a national gold standard for parental engagement.

Almost all staff of the predecessor schools transferred to the academy when it opened. However, during the last year, there has been an extended period of turbulence which resulted in high levels of staff changes. A number of staff left the academy during its first year and the academy has had difficulties in appointing suitably qualified and experienced staff, for example in mathematics and ICT. During its first year the principal consulted upon and subsequently implemented a staffing review. Three vice principals currently support the principal.

Pupils' achievement and the extent to which they enjoy their learning

Students' attainment on entry to the academy is exceptionally low. Standards at the end of Year 9 are well below the age related expectations, although they are closer to the average in mathematics. Standards of literacy are well below national expectations in all year groups. Listening skills are generally weak and student responses to questions are often brief and expressed in partial sentences. In writing, teachers' expectation of students in terms of the planning, presentation and accuracy of their work is not always high. Standards in mathematics are well below the national average by the end of Key Stage 4. The proportion of students achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C is significantly below average. Standards are low partly as a result of a legacy of underachievement and a lack of consistently good teaching. A small but significant proportion of students have poor attitudes to work, however more robust systems introduced by senior leaders are beginning to have an impact. This is seen strongly in the improved attitudes to learning that the younger students have. Although still inconsistent, students' learning in lessons is satisfactory.

The academy's most recent tracking of information indicates that standards and the rate of progress are improving and that more students are on course to reach their targets or are working at appropriate levels for their age. This has been brought about because the quality of teaching is improving. The recently introduced system for monitoring attainment and tracking progress is robust, which means that interventions can be targeted more specifically at groups and individual students.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Students have a good understanding of personal safety. They say they feel safe and well cared for, and are confident that issues such as rare cases of bullying are addressed promptly and sensitively. They have strong moral values and a sound understanding of other cultures. They are conscious of the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and are good at identifying what this entails. The academy is determined to break the culture of low attendance. Although there have been minor improvements and successes with individuals, the overall rate of attendance is still too low and presents a major barrier to raising standards.

The effectiveness of provision

Within the first year of the academy opening, the senior leaders have taken clear steps to identify the areas for improvement in teaching and learning. Previous information on the quality of teaching and learning, collated over a period of four terms, did not give an accurate evaluation on the strengths and areas for improvement. Consequently, this unreliable data led to middle managers who were monitoring teaching and learning thinking that the quality was better than it was. External evaluation of teaching and learning followed by newly developed internal monitoring systems have resulted in all staff having a better understanding of the main characteristics of good teaching and learning.

The quality of teaching seen is satisfactory overall with a significant pocket of much that is good. Focused training and support programmes are used to eradicate inadequate teaching and learning but a minority of lessons observed during the inspection still fell short of expectations. Good teaching was observed in a number of subjects across the curriculum and all had a number of shared characteristics. Firstly, planning was well structured and reflected the starting points of students; work was tailored to their needs and teachers increased students' confidence and independence by ensuring that basic skills were outlined and reviewed before developing the main teaching points. Secondly, the main body of the lessons involved students working on short timed activities as they increasingly built on the taught skills. Thirdly, teachers used assessment, including target grades, consistently well to assess students' grasp of the work and to provide extra support or explanation if there were misconceptions. Fourthly, students talked through effective questioning and occasionally group work was used well to explore learning. Finally, resources were well matched to individual needs, pace was brisk and students were engaged and worked purposefully. In these lessons, there was good classroom management, relationships were good and the teaching assistants provided effective support and advice enabling students to keep up with the pace of work.

In inadequate lessons, there was a lack of clear learning outcomes and students did the minimum amount of work. Too often in these lessons, work was not matched to

students' needs, there was insufficient challenge and explanation lacked clarity. Students do not make enough progress where teaching was unimaginative and did not cater fully for their needs. There are some examples of good marking with clear targets for improvement but this practice is not widespread across the academy.

Care, guidance and support for students are an increasing strength of the academy's work. Staff know the students very well and have worked effectively with them to provide good guidance, advice and support. For instance, students in Key Stage 4 received good guidance when selecting their options. There is effective preventative support work with the most vulnerable students who have social, emotional, learning or behavioural difficulties, in particular, those at risk of exclusion and those making the transition from primary schools to the academy. Behaviour has improved significantly because there is rigour in applying the behaviour management strategies and providing good quality support in the behaviour unit. The impact of this work can be seen in the students developing more positive attitudes to their work. Assessment data is used to track students' progress and set clear targets for them to achieve although these are not always used when planning lessons. Some marking fails to give students sufficient guidance and there is insufficient attention to helping students take pride in their work.

The academy has clearly identified the learning needs of students entering Year 7. Their attainment on entry is very low, to the extent that a significant minority are unable to perform the most basic operations in, for example, mathematics. Senior leaders have developed an innovative curriculum that matches their needs: a primary skills based approach has been adopted and there is a sharp focus on improving basic skills so that students can fully access the curriculum throughout Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. The most able Year 7 are fast tracked as a separate group. The full impact of this work, although emerging, is being embedded and the academy recognises that there is still more to do in relation to mapping students' progress and ensuring that basic skills are fully embedded in all subjects.

There is a good range of pathways for students in Key Stage 4. Courses are carefully tailored to needs through analysis of suitability of courses and guidance when selecting options. The sixth form curriculum has planned pathways including vocational courses, diplomas as well as the AS-level courses which are relatively new.

Partnership work with a local provider is ensuring that the academy is developing physical education, part of its specialisms, as a much sought after course by a large group of sixth form students who are taught off site. The academy's specialisms are more developed in physical education. Further work is yet to be done to ensure that all of the specialisms are impacting on outcomes across the academy.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

Senior leaders have successfully established a clear direction for the academy.

There is an emphatic focus on raising standards, and senior leaders have a robust knowledge of the barriers that need to be overcome in order to do this. Senior leaders have secured a stable environment by having a relentless focus on improving behaviour. Students speak about these positive changes and recount the recent improvements; the reduction in the number of exclusions is a testimony to this. The strong leadership from the top is clearly making an impact and the academy has satisfactory capacity to continue to improve.

Progress has been hindered by transitional arrangements for the academy. However, the principal has acted decisively and is leading successful changes in the culture and climate within the academy. For example, lessons are monitored systematically and teachers receive feedback on how to make lessons better still for students. A robust programme of continuing professional development has been established and staff are encouraged and expected to share good practice and learn from one another.

Some middle managers are new in post and difficulties over recruitment and retention have had a considerable impact at this level of management. For example, there has been a lack of continuity in the management of mathematics, which has very recently been placed in the hands of new staff, who are enthusiastic and good practitioners but inexperienced in management. The effectiveness of middle managers is too variable. For example, some are not making sufficient use of assessment data nor are they sufficiently skilled in the analysis and evaluation of performance in their subjects.

Procedures to ensure the safety of students meet government guidelines. There are, for example, effective procedures for ensuring the safeguarding of students through the checks made on all adults who work in the academy at the time of the inspection.

External support

The academy benefits from the input of the School Improvement Partner, who has a robust, accurate view of its work and has been a good critical friend. The impact of external support shows in the progress that has been made in raising the quality of teaching and learning.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Raise students' literacy and numeracy skills across all subjects
- Eradicate inadequate teaching by monitoring students' understanding, by matching activities to challenge students of different abilities and by ensuring they know how to improve
- Ensure middle leaders develop the skills to rigorously monitor, evaluate and drive improvements in order to embed systems and raise standards.

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

Yours sincerely

Kekshan Salaria
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF [Paul.hann@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk]