

Serco Inspections
Boundary House
2 Wythall Green Way
Middle Lane
BIRMINGHAM
West Midlands
B47 6LW

T 0300 123 1231
Text Phone: 0161 6188524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Mr Jonathan Gillard
Principal
New Rickstones Academy
Conrad Road
Witham
Essex
CM8 2SD

Dear Mr Gillard

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to New Rickstones Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Martin Cragg HMI to your academy on 16 and 17 March 2010, 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 a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, scrutinised documents and met with the Principal, four vice-principals, two associate assistant vice-principals, the data manager, a group of middle leaders, two groups of students, the chair of governors and the Managing Director of Schools and Academies for the Academies Enterprise Trust.

Context

The New Rickstones Academy opened on the site of the predecessor school in September 2008. Plans are in place to replace the old buildings with new accommodation built on the same site by 2011. The academy is part of a federation with three other academies, all sponsored by the Academies Enterprise Trust. It specialises in mathematics and the arts. The academy is smaller than average with 698 students in the main school and 117 in the sixth form. It is currently under-

subscribed. It serves a local community with some areas of deprivation but no higher than that found nationally. The number of students eligible for free school meals is below average. The majority of students are white British; the proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is below the national average. A higher than average percentage of students has special educational needs and/or disabilities. The majority of staff, including some members of the senior leadership team transferred to the academy from the predecessor school. Currently, the academy is almost fully staffed. A new principal, some senior leaders and a new Board of Governors were appointed in the first term of opening.

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

The academy inherited a history of underachievement from the predecessor school where overall attainment was consistently below average. Students join the academy in Year 7 with attainment that is below average. In its first year, the academy has made an immediate impact on raising attainment. Key Stage 3 results have risen in all core subjects although targets were not met in English, science or information and communication technology. In Key Stage 4, results improved dramatically; 57% of Year 11 students attained at least five A* to C grades at GCSE and the percentage attaining five A* to C grades including English and mathematics rose from 19% in 2008 to 37% in 2009. This was close to the academy's own target and exceeded national floor targets. The percentage of students attaining five or more A* to G grades increased but remained below average, mainly because not all students followed a full programme of GCSE or vocational courses. Results were very low in a number of subjects, including art, design technology and French. Overall attainment remains low, but these results represent a significant improvement.

This progress is a direct result of improved attendance and behaviour, better quality teaching and learning and most notably, a range of interventions by teachers and managers which ensured that students in Year 11 attained what they were capable of in last year's examinations. These strategies have been maintained and implemented again this year; senior leaders predict that 58% of students will attain five or more GCSEs and 43% will attain five GCSEs including English and mathematics. Already, 41% of Year 11 students have attained at least a GCSE grade C in mathematics. However, teachers' recent assessments in a number of other subjects show a significant proportion of students are underachieving against the targets set for them.

The academy has made satisfactory progress towards improving the quality of students' learning and progress. Contextual value-added data shows that in 2009, students made significantly less progress than expected, particularly lower-ability girls and those students requiring additional support. To improve this, learning support assistants are now deployed in subject areas to provide additional support for those who need it. Assessment data suggests this is beginning to lead to some improvement. Observations by inspectors found that in the majority of lessons, most

students make satisfactory progress. They work steadily and show interest in their learning. Students work collaboratively in small groups; they thoroughly enjoy practical activities and told inspectors they would like more. They make good progress when they are provided with tasks that stimulate their interest and enthusiasm, but this is not the case in all lessons. Occasionally, work is either too difficult or too easy which results in some students losing interest and disengaging from learning. Procedures for collecting and collating data have improved and provide teachers and managers with a clearer picture of how well students are achieving across all subjects. The progress of all students, particularly vulnerable students and those at risk of underachieving is periodically assessed to ensure they attend regularly, behave well and remain on-track to meet their academic targets. These procedures are becoming more systematic. However, their use varies across subjects and their impact in the earlier key stage is less pronounced than in Key Stage 4.

Sixth Form

The academy has made inadequate progress towards raising attainment in the sixth form. Although some progress has been made since the start of this academic year, inspectors confirmed the views of senior leaders that outcomes for students are inadequate. In 2009, results in examinations were significantly below average and rates of retention and attendance were low. Following a thorough review by the new leader of the sixth form, significant changes have been made to clarify teachers' expectations of students, monitor their performance and improve learning and progress. Improved study facilities, including computers are provided and students are expected to make use of them in study periods. Regular monitoring of students' attendance, their welfare and academic progress is beginning to lead to improved progress, better attendance and more engagement in the life of the academy, but overall standards remain low. Students value the increased range of suitable courses on offer and the advice offered on the best pathways for them to follow, but these developments need more time before they impact fully on attainment. Lesson monitoring is not as well-developed as it is in the earlier key stages.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Clear expectations about students' appearance, their behaviour and attitudes towards learning are reinforced by the majority of staff. Most students wear their new uniform with pride, behave well and talk positively about the changes made since the academy opened. They say that "it is more strict, but in a good way" and recognise that "teachers are trying harder to help us in Year 11". New enrichment activities at lunchtimes and after-school add to their enjoyment of the academy. Most students are punctual. Improved monitoring has led to a rise in attendance which is now closer to the national average. Behaviour has improved in lessons and around the school; the academy is a calm and orderly place to be. Exclusions have fallen dramatically; there have been none this year because students are dealt with

on the premises. The minority of students that fail to meet the expectations of staff are referred to 'the zone' internal support centre, allowing them to remain in school to continue their studies and other students to work in lessons without distractions. New security fencing around the academy grounds ensures that students are kept safe and also adds to their health and well-being as they must stay on the site during lunchtimes. The academy has made satisfactory progress towards raising standards of attendance and behaviour. However, students told inspectors that bullying does happen in the academy and not all of them were confident that if incidents were brought to the attention of staff they would be dealt with effectively.

The effectiveness of provision

The majority of teachers share good relations with students, set high expectations and use their good subject knowledge to stimulate and enthuse learners. There is greater consistency because all teachers use a common framework to plan learning and assessment tasks. Lesson observations carried out jointly between HMI and senior leaders confirmed that the quality of teaching is satisfactory and, at times better than this. However, the amount of good teaching remains low. In the most effective lessons learning objectives focus on what students will learn rather than what they will do, and different activities are provided for students of all abilities. However, inspectors found that although most teachers incorporate different learning tasks into their planning, students end up doing the same work which for some is either too easy or too difficult. When this occurs, less able students become bored and their behaviour deteriorates.

Staff training has improved the way teachers use day-to-day assessments to gauge progress and inform students of how well they are doing, but the use of these strategies is variable. In the best lessons, teachers use incisive questioning to test students' knowledge and confirm that they all fully understand. Students observe others and comment on their work and check their progress against set criteria to see how well they are doing. However, these procedures are not always planned to enhance student learning and often merely interrupt the flow of the lesson. During questioning, too many teachers accept the first answer, often provided by the same students and fail to check whether all of them understand and know what to do. Despite improvements, some inadequate teaching remains. Although decisive action has been taken to address underperforming teachers, a small but significant minority of lessons fail to stimulate students' interest and consequently, they make insufficient progress. At times, the pace of learning is too slow, teacher-talk dominates lesson time and there are too few opportunities for students to work together and share ideas. Low expectations are reflected in some teachers' marking which does not challenge students' poor presentation of their work. Assessment data is submitted every half-term to track the progress of individual students, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. This system is robust and is helping to identify those at risk of underachieving, but it needs more time to become fully embedded throughout the academy.

The academy is developing a curriculum to meet the different needs and interests of all students. The range of vocational and work-related courses has expanded to offer coursework and methods of assessment more suited to many of the academy's students. As a result, their attendance and enjoyment has improved. Increasing numbers of students follow BTEC courses; results are improving and this is contributing well to raising attainment. Specialist areas of mathematics and the arts are improving but these areas are not yet strong enough to lead improvements across all subjects. Innovative programmes in Key Stage 3 are developing well the basic skills and confidence of younger learners, and allowing them to commence GCSE study in Years 8 and 9. These developments are new this year and need more time to demonstrate their full impact on students' achievements. Support is available for students in all key stages, including dedicated one-to-one support for a small number of disabled students who are fully included in the life of the academy. The academy's arrangements for safeguarding students meet statutory requirements. Guidance about which courses and careers to pursue as curriculum choice expands is improving.

The effectiveness of leadership and management

The impact of effective leadership from the principal and his team of senior leaders is reflected in the significant improvements made so far. They have had a notable impact on raising attainment and are demonstrating that by continuing to do what they have been doing they have the capacity to deliver further improvements. Self-evaluation is largely accurate. A detailed three-year development plan is regularly reviewed to gauge the progress made towards meeting the very challenging targets set for the academy. Senior leaders have shared some good practice across the federation, most notably to improve students' behaviour, literacy skills and raise achievement in Key Stage 4. Regular line-management meetings have increased the accountability of middle leaders, most of whom have readily accepted further responsibility and show an increasing understanding of their roles in leading improvement. There is no permanent subject leader in science and some existing subject leaders are ineffective. Middle leaders are increasingly engaged in monitoring the work of others in their departments, including lesson observations, but not all of them have had opportunities to share good practice across other departments and within the federation.

The governing board demonstrate a good understanding of the role of the academy, its strengths and areas for development, and the contribution it can make to the local community. Regular meetings between the chairman and the principal ensure that the board has a realistic view of the progress made by the academy so far. Governors are working hard to enlist the full support of all parents and in ensure that students play a leading role in its future development.

External support

Support and challenge from the Academies Enterprise Trust is helping senior leaders to meet the targets set for them in development plans. Partnership working and collaboration at senior leadership level across the four academies in the federation provides additional capacity to improve further. This has been extended to include some middle leaders, but not all of them. The school improvement partner provides an accurate assessment of the academy's performance and provides suitable challenge and advice where needed.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress..

Priorities for further improvement

- Increase the amount of good or better teaching by:
 - incorporating tasks in lessons to match the different abilities of students, especially those that find learning difficult
 - ensuring that procedures to assess how well students are doing on a day-to-day basis enhance learning and do not interrupt the flow of lessons
 - providing students with activities that are stimulating, interesting and retain their interest.

- Improve the quality of leadership and management by:
 - ensuring all subjects without effective leaders in post are well supported
 - increasing the frequency and rigour of subject leaders' monitoring of lessons to identify what specific strategies aid students' progress, and ensuring that they become firmly embedded throughout the department
 - enabling subject leaders to share good practice across all subjects, and at a suitable time, across the federation.

- Raise achievement and progress in the sixth-form by:
 - ensuring that newly-introduced monitoring procedures become firmly established
 - confirming the quality of teaching in lessons and its impact on students' learning.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the chair of the board 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

John Mitcheson
Her Majesty's Inspector