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Mr Paul Hollingum
Principal
St Mary Magdalene Academy
Liverpool Road
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Dear Mr Hollingum

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to St Mary Magdalene Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with Lorna Brackstone HMI to your academy on 12 and 13 May 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, members of the senior team, groups of students in the primary department, students in the secondary department, a group of parents, the chair of governors and a representative of the sponsors.

Context

St Mary Magdalene Academy is an all-through, community-based Church of England school catering for students aged 4 to 18. It has specialisms in humanities and global citizenship. Following the closure of its predecessor school, a highly successful primary school, the academy opened in an ultra-modern building on the same but extended site in September 2007, with a full primary intake of 212 and 30 children entering Reception. The academy is over-subscribed, with over four applications for each place. There are 572 students on roll, including 360 in Years 7 and Year 8. As the academy expands over the next six years, 180 students will join the remaining year groups through to Year 11. The sixth form will be opening in September 2009 and will eventually have approximately 300 students. Altogether, at capacity, the academy expects to cater for 1,700 students. Currently, there are slightly more boys than girls. The academy serves an ethnically diverse area of mixed housing in some

of the most economically deprived and affluent wards in the borough. While the largest group of students are of White British descent, over half the students are from minority ethnic groups, with a very small proportion speaking English as a second language. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is well above average and the proportion with a statement of special educational need is considerably high. The main learning difficulties and/or disabilities are speech, language and communication, behavioural, emotional and social, moderate and specific learning difficulties. The academy has successfully brokered a deal with the borough and set up a communication and interpersonal skills unit to support the increasing number of students who have communication difficulties. Attainment on entry is broadly average. The academy has achieved the Healthy School Award and is currently applying for the International Schools Award.

The academy is sponsored by the London Diocesan Board of Schools, and as such is very involved in the professional development of the staff. The academy is fully staffed with a good mix of experienced teachers and those new to the profession. Since the academy opened, several staff have left for more suitable positions. The key post-holders have taken up their appointments and the expertise of staff is used very well across the junior and secondary departments, as a means of sharing good practice and supporting the transitional curriculum from Key Stage 2 to 3.

Achievement and standards

Children enter the Reception with skills as expected for their age group and, overall, standards of attainment on entry to Year 7 are broadly average. Children get off to a good start in Reception and make good progress. In 2008 the children met and often exceeded age-related expectations in all areas of learning, with the exception of mathematics, with boys making significant progress in their personal, social and emotional development and their literacy and numeracy skills. In 2008, at the end of Key Stage 1, students' attainment was above the national average and, at the end of Key Stage 2, while standards achieved were slightly better than the national average, they were below average at the higher levels.

Scrutiny of the tracking data on students' attainment confirms that in Years 7 and 8, students are on track to meet the challenging targets in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The assessment records show that, in Year 8, the targets will be exceeded in science, with a significant number of students in Year 7 surpassing them in English and mathematics. This represents at least good progress, with a significant number of students making outstanding progress. Students with specific learning difficulties make exceptionally good progress. Evidence from observation and scrutiny of students' books confirms that they are achieving well. The academy's analysis of assessment data has resulted in swift action being taken to tackle signs of underachievement among, for example, boys of Caribbean heritage, whose literacy and numeracy skills on entry are lower than their peers'. Similarly, initiatives have also been introduced to ensure that other groups, such as gifted and talented students, Pakistani students and those of mixed heritage, achieve their potential.

Continual tracking and analysis of assessment data is ensuring that actions are taken immediately to address weaknesses in performance. For example, assessment records show that boys do much better than girls in mathematics and science, while girls achieve well in English. The gap in students' performance in English and mathematics has narrowed because attention has been focused on providing extra targeted lessons to improve basic skills through withdrawal groups and the innovative curricular specialism in humanities and global citizenship. The specialism is used very well to challenge students to use language accurately in order to access the curriculum. In this, the academy is proactive in helping its students to stay on track to achieve their challenging targets.

Personal development and well-being

Students enjoy attending the academy and most are well mannered and respectful. They are enthusiastic learners who join in activities and work sensibly together in pairs or in groups. Personal development is good and, around the site and in lessons, the majority behave well and relationships are good. The students have a well-developed sense of right and wrong and respond well to the opportunities provided in lessons and during assemblies to reflect on moral issues. Students say they feel safe and that there are adults who listen to any worries or concerns they may have. Bullying is dealt with sensitively and decisively. The academy has very good systems in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour. Attendance is good in the primary and secondary departments and the academy is working effectively to improve punctuality. The number of fixed-term and internal exclusions which were previously rising, have fallen as a result of the good systems, including the mentoring and partnership work with external providers, that support students at risk of permanent exclusion.

Students know how to keep healthy and fit and appreciate the nutritious meals cooked in the academy. Parents speak highly of the strong sense of community, which is fostered through assemblies, residential visits, drama productions and the emphasis placed on preparing students for living in a multi-racial society. The work of the primary school council and members of parliament in the secondary department ensures that the students gain a secure understanding of how democracy works and also enables their views and opinions to be considered.

Quality of provision

The quality of teaching is good. Teachers prepare their sessions thoroughly using a common format which identifies the purpose of the lesson and what is to be learnt. These intentions are shared with the students, which enables them to contribute to the evaluation of their own learning. In the best lessons teachers make good use of time; they ask questions that skilfully challenge students' learning, engage them through stimulating activities that are well matched to their needs and interests, and make effective use of electronic whiteboards. Teaching assistants provide good individual support for students who have a learning difficulty and/or disability.



Although most lessons are pitched appropriately, some are satisfactory because expectations of students' behaviour are not always high enough and the pace of learning slows while attention is given to a small number whose misbehaviour disrupts the flow of teaching and learning.

At the end of lessons students routinely take part in evaluating their own progress and this is used to help the teachers make further preparations. Students value the comments teachers make on their work and are also keen to achieve their targets when they are set. However, not all staff use the marking and target-setting policy consistently to help students improve their learning.

The curriculum is broad and balanced and meets students' needs. The Key Stage 3 curriculum, now condensed to two years, is planned to help students access more flexible pathways when they make the transition to Key Stage 4. Plans for the Key Stage 4 curriculum are fully in place. Similarly, the academy has explored suitable courses for the sixth form and has made arrangements to introduce the International Baccalaureate. The academy is also considering implementing the International Baccalaureate Primary Years programme.

The specialism in humanities and global citizenship makes a good contribution to the curriculum. The inclusive programmes of study, which are based around themes such as diversity, conflict resolution and globalisation, ensure that all groups of students are able to participate and to develop as well-rounded individuals. The academy has adopted an innovative approach to organising subjects and teaching key skills. Students in Years 7 and 8 are taught literacy and numeracy skills in a home base unit. These skills are helping students gain more competence in using a range of writing styles across the curriculum and, increasingly, technical accuracy is set to improve. Students value the extended day, which gives them opportunities to take part in a range of enrichment activities including unusual sports. However, a small minority of students do not feel that they have sufficient choice of activities or find that it makes the day too long.

Care, guidance and support are good. The monitoring of students' work, target setting and curriculum unit tests are factors that contribute to the teachers meeting students' needs. Safeguarding requirements are fully met.

Leadership and management

Since the opening of the academy in 2007, the principal has led the new and expanding team of staff through a number of changes. The principal has the very able support of the senior team and middle managers. He has clearly communicated his vision of high achievement and successfully steered the senior and middle leaders through implementing planned changes during the building project. The building project, which ended in April 2009, presented many difficulties but the academy's plans to accelerate students' progress did not veer off track. The strong leadership has ensured a smooth start for and running of the academy.

Senior and middle managers have demonstrated their commitment to working with the principal to improving the life chances of the students. As such, they work together and teamwork is a strength of the academy's work. There is emphasis on professional development and on using internal expertise and the London Diocesan Board of Schools to develop the skills of teachers and managers. As a result, there is a systematic approach to spreading the benefits of training widely; there is a consistent approach to monitoring and evaluating the school's work as one of the main ways of driving improvement. For example, the English and humanities faculties introduced further training to ensure that there is a coherent approach to moderating the home based curriculum unit tests. At this stage, although the middle managers are analysing assessment data, they are not yet asking the class teachers to take control of and to scrutinise the data of the classes they teach.

The senior team ensures that new initiatives are well researched and considered so that the right decision is made for the students. Good examples are the way curriculum planning and provision for students with specific learning needs have been made to fit their needs and aspirations. In addition, the senior leaders have used the findings of the review to address the weaknesses identified in the provision. Consequently, middle managers are better placed to lead in their areas of responsibility because of the training and coaching provided. Departments have well-constructed individual self-evaluation plans; however, action plans have not been drawn up to identify how weaknesses are to be tackled.

The work on community cohesion is a strength and is embedded in the specialism; in particular, the international work is exceptionally good. Parents spoke highly about the stance the academy has taken in promoting cultural diversity. However, the academy has not yet evaluated its work on community cohesion.

Leaders and managers evaluate the quality of the academy's provision accurately and the plan for improvement is reviewed and updated. At this stage, milestones, evaluation and costs are not included in the plan. The principal has been proactive in using the external review to tackle identified weaknesses. Actions taken have had a good impact, with some outstanding outcomes and, as a result, the capacity for improvement is outstanding.

Governors are very ambitious for the academy. They are well informed about the work and set challenging targets for all staff to achieve. The governors are involved in the academy and work closely with leaders and managers, whom they hold to account very well. They set clear parameters and fulfil their duties well.

External support

The London Diocesan Board of Schools, as a key partner, works tirelessly with the academy on all aspects of provision. The academy has worked very closely with the local authority to set up provision for students with speech and language difficulties. There has also been joint work with consultants, local schools and independent providers. The impact of this partnership is demonstrated in a number of ways. First,

the newly qualified teachers at the academy are benefiting from the locally available training courses. Second, the academy's work in helping students to make rapid progress has been rightly recognised locally, which has led to the leaders and managers being approached to share their innovative practices and expertise widely.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Further develop teaching and ensure that it is consistently good or better by sharing and developing the best practice widely so that students' achievement is not compromised.
- Use the marking policy consistently so that teachers support and challenge students to improve their work.
- Ensure that the small minority of students in the secondary department who do not always behave in an acceptable way in lessons do not disrupt the learning of others by fully meeting their needs so that they can become disciplined learners who enjoy their learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Carmen Rodney
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF