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27 May 2011

Mr P Hearne
Executive Director
The Northumberland Church of England Academy
Lichfield Close
Ashington
Northumberland
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Dear Mr Hearne

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection to The Northumberland Church of England Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 11 and 12 May 2011 with Margaret Farrow HMI, 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 a number of senior leaders, including the Executive Director and Principal Directors for secondary and primary education, nominated members of staff and two members of the governing body, who also represented the sponsors.

Context

The academy, which opened in September 2009, comprises a former 13-18 high school, two feeder 9-13 middle schools, and seven feeder first schools. Currently, there are nine sites, which will reduce to five by Easter 2012 when all new buildings are completed. The age range covered is three to 19 years of age and includes a section of the academy that caters for pupils identified with profound and multiple learning difficulties or those with severe learning difficulties. There are 2,367 pupils on roll, which is much larger than average. Almost all the staff from the predecessor schools joined the academy when it opened, with only a very small number of new appointees. Since opening, a number of internal leadership appointments have been made, particularly on the primary campuses. The academy is co-sponsored by the Church of England and the Duke of Northumberland Estates and its specialism is in design and the environment.

January 2011



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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

The collective drive to improve teaching across the academy is hastening pupils' progress at all key stages. The children's personal skills, knowledge and abilities are well below those expected when they start at the academy at the age of three. However, the academy's clear and effective focus on improving provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage is helping the children to make good overall progress so that they enter Key Stage 1 with at least average attainment. This rate of improvement is also making a difference to the pupils' progress in Key Stage 1, where current assessments indicate that overall achievement is in line with those expected for their age. The most notable improvements are seen in Key Stage 3, where current tracking shows that a high proportion of pupils will achieve Level 5 in English and mathematics. The current proportion of pupils expected to gain five or more good GCSEs, including English and mathematics, by the end of Key Stage 4 is on track to be above that of last year, when the academy's results improved by 10 percentage points to reach the minimum level expected of secondary-aged pupils. Improvements have been more modest in the sixth form but the pace of improvement is accelerating. This is because of stronger leadership, improved options, advice and guidance, and a better focus on students' individual learning plans. These plans trigger advice and support where needed and are monitored and tracked regularly.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

The academy's successful work to improve the quality of teaching and learning has been accompanied by an extremely rigorous and effective approach to improving behaviour. Behaviour management strategies are applied consistently across all campuses and a number of the pupils spoke convincingly about how much behaviour has improved since the academy opened. Throughout the monitoring visit, inspectors observed generally good behaviour, with the pupils polite and respectful to teachers and peers. As a result of these improvements, there are no fixed-period or permanent exclusions this academic year to date. The academy tracks the attendance of all pupils meticulously and has developed a vast range of effective strategies to improve it. Actions taken make a significant difference to reducing the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent. Although attendance remains low, it is improving, particularly at secondary level, and is now much closer to the national average.

The effectiveness of provision

The quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning are improving rapidly because of the robust evaluation and monitoring by senior leaders and managers across the academy. A programme of professional development, coaching and sharing good practice combined with robust performance management arrangements have also made a significant difference. As a result, the proportion of good teaching has increased steadily and the proportion of inadequate teaching almost eliminated. The vast majority of pupils now make satisfactory or better progress in lessons.

The teachers' assessment of the pupils' ongoing performance is developing well, particularly in English and mathematics across the academy, with the regular collection and use of data to assess progress against identified targets. It is less well developed across all other subjects at primary level. Generally, the pupils know their academic targets and how well they are achieving against these. However, not all teachers are using this information well enough in lessons to pitch learning so that it takes better account of pupils' prior learning and their capabilities. Also, the vast majority of planning focuses on what will be taught and too little on the learning outcomes expected of the pupils. As a consequence, some pupils find the work too easy and others lose interest when work is above their current level of understanding. As a result, overall progress is currently satisfactory rather than good. Those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities are identified in planning but teachers are not always skilful enough in adapting lessons to meet their individual needs fully. As a consequence, progress slows to a broadly satisfactory level. The pupils in the special educational needs facility make good progress because of the quality of the individual care and support provided. The quality of teachers' marking is at least satisfactory and occasionally good but is inconsistent across the academy. However, the pupils are becoming better informed about how well they are doing and what they need to do to improve further.

Curricular developments are contributing positively to improving pupils' achievement and attendance and ensuring better equality of opportunity for all. School-based literacy initiatives are helping to hasten pupils' progress in reading and increasing their confidence in sharing their views and feelings. The 14-19 curriculum has been restructured to meet the developing needs and interests of the pupils, the vast majority of whom report that there are better options available, with improved advice and guidance procedures. However, senior leaders and managers recognise there is still some way to go to ensure a good overall curriculum and plans are well advanced to achieve this.

Alongside the drive to raise standards, senior leaders and managers have worked hard to raise aspirations among staff and pupils alike, and they are increasingly successful in this endeavour. Pupils respond well to the higher expectations for behaviour and attitudes to learning, which contribute to the calm, purposeful and respectful atmosphere that pervades the academy.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Senior leaders and managers, including the governing body, share a common ambition and drive to raise standards through improved provision across the academy. Academy planning is thorough and well directed on the key priorities and actions that will improve pupils' outcomes and raise attainment. Focused monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning, linked to academy-based action research, are helping to develop staff expertise and confidence, particularly in literacy and numeracy. This also helps to highlight the most effective aspects of pupils' learning and to generate a coherent and agreed approach to the quality of education for all pupils. The monitoring of teaching and learning is robust and, as a result, senior leaders are well informed about the relative strengths and areas in need of

further development. Middle management is subject to continuous monitoring and review to ensure ongoing change and development are aligned to greater accountability. The governance of the academy is progressing well because of clear roles and responsibilities, together with a range of effective strategies that support the high levels of accountability from leaders and managers at all levels. The governing body is well informed of the progress being made across the whole academy through regular and detailed executive director reports.

External support

The quality of the external support is good. The use of external specialists has provided valuable academy-based research on the effectiveness of some of its provision, which is contributing positively to the good overall progress being made.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Ensure that all teaching reaches at least a consistently good or better standard by:
 - planning lessons to take greater account of the pupils' prior learning
 - identifying more clearly the intended learning outcomes within the range of activities taught
 - creating more opportunities for the pupils to take greater responsibility for some aspects of their learning, as an aid to helping them achieve their full potential.

- Ensure that the effective strategies from the school-based assessment initiatives in English, mathematics and 'learning to learn' are cascaded across all curricular areas throughout the academy.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body and the Academies Group at the Department for Education. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Brian Blake
Her Majesty's Inspector