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Mr Tony Morrison
Principal
Park Hall Academy
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Dear Mr Morrison

Academies initiative: monitoring inspection of Park Hall Academy

Introduction

Following my visit to your academy on 11 and 12 May 2011 with Andrew Cook 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 a first monitoring inspection in connection with the academies initiative.

Evidence

Inspectors observed the academy's work, including 21 lesson observations. They scrutinised documents, including safeguarding documentation, and met with the Principal, nominated staff, groups of students and representatives of the governing body.

Context

The academy opened in September 2009 in the impressive new accommodation of its predecessor, Park Hall School. Most staff transferred to the academy. During its first year, the academy underwent a financially-induced staff reduction exercise which removed a tier of senior leadership. The Principal, most of the current senior leaders, and some key middle leaders, were new appointments. The academy's specialist subjects are in performing arts and mathematics.

The academy has 1058 students on roll, including 196 in the sixth form. Its increasing popularity is reflected in the significant increase in first choice applications for September 2011. Most students are White British and speak English as their first language. A large majority come from the immediate locality, but a significant number travel from further afield, including Birmingham boroughs. The proportion of students known to be eligible for free school meals is above the national figure. The proportion with special educational needs and/or disabilities is well above average.

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

Standards are rising strongly. In its first set of examination results in 2010, the academy achieved notable increases in almost all key attainment indicators, successfully sustaining the significant improvements achieved by the predecessor school in 2009. All Year 11 students achieved at least five higher grade GCSEs in 2010, far exceeding the national figure, and producing impressively high average points scores. The performance of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities and those known to be eligible for free school meals was significantly above their national comparator figures. However, attainment in mathematics was low, so that only 32% of Year 11 students achieved at least five A* to C grades which included both English and mathematics. This is well below the national figure.

The academy makes good use of rigorous assessment data to set ambitious targets, to track and analyse the progress of individual students, and to target support. Students know their targets for each subject and their current level of performance. Early entry results for the current Year 11 cohort and the academy's rigorous tracking data indicate there is a clear trajectory of improvement: 36% of students already have at least a C grade in English and mathematics and 48% are on track to achieve at least five higher grade GCSEs, including English and mathematics.

Published data place the academy in the top 5% of schools nationally in 2010 for its overall performance in terms of students' progress, but in the bottom 10% for mathematics. However, targeted support for mathematics teaching has strengthened provision. Evidence from lesson observations supports the academy's view that students' rates of progress are accelerating. The quality of learning was good or better in the majority of lessons observed during the inspection. In mathematics, the quality of learning was at least satisfactory.

Standards in the sixth form are also rising steadily, with notable improvements in the overall pass rates and the proportion of higher grades achieved in 2010. Published data and assessment information indicate that sixth-form students make progress that is at least in line with their capabilities, and that students on vocational courses make exceptional progress.

Other relevant pupil outcomes

Improvements in students' attitudes and behaviour, and the sharp decrease in exclusions, reflect the positive engagement of most students. Around the academy, including break and lunch times, the students show consideration for one another and towards visitors, and respect for their environment. The academy has successfully established a positive climate for learning. In lessons, students settle quickly, behave well and sustain their concentration. They sometimes lack the confidence to contribute ideas but they stay on task even when the pace of learning slackens. When teachers capitalise on strong positive relationships to make learning fun and set high expectations, students respond by working hard and with palpable enjoyment.

Students are punctual to lessons, but too many, particularly in Years 10 and 11, have a casual approach to punctuality at the start of the day. The academy works hard to improve attendance but levels of absence and lateness to school remain too high. The persistent absence of a minority of students raises the most concern. For example, the proportion of persistent non-attendees in Year 11 has reached as high as 12.8% this year.

The effectiveness of provision

The foundations for the academy's rising standards were firmly established by curriculum changes introduced in the predecessor school. Students in both the main school and the sixth form are offered a broad range and combination of curriculum pathways, including a wide variety of vocational courses, that match their different needs, abilities and aspirations. Their learning is extended by varied extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities, some linked with the academy's performing arts specialism.

Since the academy opened, the quality of teaching has strengthened significantly. Although a few weaknesses remain, there is a core of consistently good teaching and a burgeoning element of outstanding practice. Most lessons are well structured and carefully planned, with suitably challenging outcomes for different groups of students. There is a suitable balance of teacher-input and independent learning that develops the students' understanding through carefully structured pair and group work. Teachers use the interactive whiteboards effectively in their expositions to communicate essential subject knowledge and model key processes. In the best lessons, the teachers' infectious enthusiasm and enjoyment of their subject injected pace and challenge that circumvented students' natural reticence, enabling, for example, Year 9 students to craft ambitiously imaginative writing. The best questioning skilfully promotes complex discussion between the students themselves, for example, in a Year 12 sociology lesson, where students debated the hidden gender curriculum.

Assessment and target-setting are emerging strengths of teaching. The newly introduced 'dialogue for learning' sheets, for example, routinely provide students with feedback on what they have done well and how they can improve the standard of their work. This dialogue, along with peer and self-assessment, is used well by many teachers and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and progress.

The academy has effective systems in place to promote good behaviour and to support individual students who struggle to meet its high expectations. It has also raised the profile of attendance and is taking a suitably robust approach to non-attendance. Good systems are in place to monitor absence and identify students whose attendance causes concern. In response to concerns, the School Attendance Panel involves members of the governing body, senior staff and the education welfare officer in discussion with parents and carers, so that courses of action are agreed and monitored.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

The lean senior team is cohesive and effective. Strong strategic leadership from the Principal has built on the foundations laid in the last year of the predecessor school and has guided the academy's further improvement. Honest self-evaluation is soundly based on rigorous monitoring and comprehensive analysis which provide the basis of suitable development planning. Systematic evaluation of teaching highlights strengths and weaknesses which are then the focus of individual support, departmental developments and whole-school training.

The governing body is well-informed and is actively involved in monitoring the academy's performance. The academy has demonstrated good capacity to sustain the improvements made in the first 18 months and to further strengthen the outcomes for students.

The academy recognises that overall attainment is constrained by students' performance in mathematics and by the indifference of some students in regard to attendance and punctuality. However, clear strategies have been developed to address underperformance in mathematics and to raise the aspirations and expectations of all students.

External support

The academy is able to turn to the Trust for support when necessary, and needs little external guidance. The support and challenge provided by the School Improvement Partner is valued highly.

Main Judgements

The academy has made good progress towards raising standards.

Priorities for further improvement

- Sustain the improvements in teaching and learning, particularly in mathematics, so that students make accelerated progress across all subjects.
- Ensure that students develop the skills, personal qualities and responsibility which will serve them well in education and employment in their future lives, particularly with regard to attendance and punctuality.

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

Yours sincerely

Mr Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector

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