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26 June 2009

Mrs Tracy Luke
The Executive Principal
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Dear Mrs Luke

Academies initiative: monitoring visit to Marsh Academy

Introduction

Following my visit with John Kennedy HMI and Joanna Beckford-Hall HMI to the Marsh Academy on 10 and 11 June 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 executive principal, head of school and other senior leaders, staff, groups of students and the chair of governors.

Context

The academy opened in September 2007 following the closure of Southlands Community Comprehensive School. It is using the same buildings as the predecessor school pending the development of new accommodation that is expected to be ready for September 2011. All staff transferred to the academy from the predecessor school. The sponsors of Marsh Academy are: Kent Local Authority; Microsoft; and, Tonbridge School. Marsh Academy works in partnership with Folkestone School for Girls. The executive principal leads both the school and the academy and there is a head of school and governing body for each establishment, with a joint committee to look at links between them. The Marsh Academy operates within the Kent selective system. It has as its specialism business and enterprise. Students are members of one of four mini-schools organised for tutorial purposes in mixed age groups from Years 7 to 11.



At 990, including 171 in the sixth form, numbers on roll are broadly similar to those in the predecessor school. The proportion of students from minority ethnic groups is well below average. The proportions with English as an additional language and eligible for free school meals are below average. The percentage of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is well above average, although the percentage with statements of educational needs is below average.

Achievement and standards

The positive impact of some effective strategies to raise achievement and standards can be seen in rising GCSE examination results because the academy has focused its attention primarily on Year 11, and also on the sixth form. The academy's records of students' attainment show that it is also rising for students currently in Year 7. The academy rightly has concerns about standards and achievement in Year 8 and about the rate of students' progress in science, especially for younger students. Progress in mathematics is good. In English it is generally satisfactory, although there are still considerable weaknesses in literacy as seen in students' work across the curriculum.

The percentage of students gaining five or more GCSE grades A* to C including English and mathematics rose from 23% in 2007 to 32% in 2008. In 2008, the percentage gaining five or more grades A* to C increased greatly to just below the national average. With some exceptions, examination results in the sixth form in 2008 showed that students' attainment was considerably lower than average. Students' progress in the AS and A-level courses was generally much lower than average, except in English Literature where it was very good. Progress on some of the applied/vocational courses was good. The school's records suggest that examination results in Year 11 and in the sixth form will show an improvement in 2009 from those in 2008.

The academy's system of keeping a track of students' progress is good and senior managers are fully aware of some differences in the performance of specific groups. For example, in Year 11, lower attaining boys have made considerably less progress than lower attaining girls whose good progress is attributed to their enjoyment of a suitable and relevant range of vocational courses. The setting of challenging targets is beginning to raise standards, although more remains to be done to ensure that staff and students use these consistently well to identify appropriate steps in learning lesson by lesson.

Progress in lessons throughout the academy is uneven and this is a concern. The variability is linked to the quality of teaching and also to inconsistencies in students' attitudes and behaviour. The quality of students' written work shows the level of their interest and commitment, as well as teachers' attention to it through marking and other forms of response. Whilst some work is presented well and with due care over content, grammar and spelling, too often it is scrappy and unfinished. Other than in some best and polished pieces, in coursework for example, handwriting is generally untidy and too many spelling mistakes go uncorrected. Students are rarely

required to speak about their ideas at any length or in a range of contexts thus limiting the development of their oral skills.

Personal development and well-being

The majority of students are keen and ready to learn in lessons. Students who spoke formally with inspectors were mature, confident and articulate and generally happy with the quality of provision. In some lessons, however, the attitudes and behaviour of a few students have a negative impact on their own learning and that of others. While such disruptive behaviour is mostly directly related to the quality of teaching, it is also due in part to the poor learning habits of a minority of students who appear not to appreciate that their own actions and attitudes affect the learning of others. Students say they feel safe in school because staff are very visible and supportive. They also state that some bullying exists and that, although they are happy to share their concerns with staff, more needs to be done to control and eradicate it.

Attendance in the academy, including the sixth form, has improved demonstrably from a low overall figure of 89.7% last year to 91.2% in the current year. The proportion of those persistently absent has also fallen as has the proportion of students arriving late for school. Attendance is still too low, however, especially in Years 9 and 11, and is a contributing factor to the slower progress being made by some students. The attendance of students currently in Year 8 shows a particularly marked dip compared with their attendance when in Year 7.

The improvements in overall attendance are directly related to the academy's high profile work on improving it. Staff make clear to parents and students the link between attendance and achievement and employ a range of good strategies and incentives to raise levels of attendance. In one assembly, students were seen receiving with pride their certificates for 100% attendance. The school site does not currently lend itself to providing a sufficiently secure environment to deter a small group of students from absenting themselves during school hours.

The rate of permanent exclusion dropped dramatically during the academy's first year and this very low rate has been sustained. This exemplifies the inclusive ethos of the academy, one of its particular strengths. The incidence of staff being called upon to support colleagues because of poor behaviour in lessons has dropped by almost 75% over the past year. The rate of fixed-term exclusion however has risen slightly this year indicating the continued existence of a significant minority of students with poor behaviour and attitudes to learning.

Quality of provision

Lessons vary greatly in quality. Inspectors observed some good lessons, but many lessons are just satisfactory, and the proportion of inadequate lessons is too high. Good lessons, such as some seen in mathematics and humanities, are helping to raise attainment but there are not yet enough of them. In the better lessons,

teachers' strong subject knowledge, effective questioning skills and behaviour management, well planned and sequenced steps in learning undertaken with good pace all contribute to students making good progress. Where teaching methods and tasks set meet the needs of all students and capture their interest, students are motivated to learn and enjoy their work. In contrast, where students are insufficiently engaged behaviour deteriorates quickly and is very poor. Students say that time is sometimes wasted by teachers having to deal with disruption, and that this frustrates them because they want to learn.

Although the academy compiles well its records of students' attainment, and analyses them both for individuals and for groups, the information is not always used well enough by teachers to plan activities in lessons that provide the right level of challenge. Teaching methods are appropriately varied in some lessons but, overall, students have limited opportunity for developing independent learning skills. The quality of marking is inconsistent. Some marking pinpoints exactly what students need to do improve their work, and helps students to make progress against challenging targets. Too often, however, simple ticks and a lack of commentary provide insufficient detail to support students in enhancing the quality and depth of their work. Where teachers pay little regard to students' written work, presentation becomes very careless and mistakes abound. Not enough is being done across all subjects to raise swiftly students' literacy skills.

Some good examples exist of teaching assistants supporting individual students well but, in the main, teaching assistants are not given sufficient guidance so as to maximise their impact on learning.

The academy has developed its curriculum in many ways. Project-based learning (PBL) in Year 7 integrates work in several subjects and enables students not only to acquire knowledge and understanding but also to develop their learning skills. Most Year 7 students enjoy the PBL curriculum. The academy acknowledges that a recent audit, including students' questionnaires and staff feedback, indicates the need for more cohesion and clarity in both the content and presentation of some PBL units of study, especially in science. In addition, recent changes to the curriculum in Years 9 to 11 and in the sixth form have widened the curriculum with the introduction of more vocational programmes increasingly tailored to the interests and specific needs of students. Through good advice and guidance students make appropriate choices of courses to study and vocational courses are increasingly popular, for example the course in public services. The enhanced curriculum is helping to raise attainment, lift aspirations and is giving students a greater chance of success in the next stages of their lives.

Developing students' emotional intelligence is a key feature in the tutorial programme. This work contributes to building students' understanding of their own and the wider community and to their learning of how to resolve conflict and communicate effectively with others.

Students are positive about the improved resources for information and communication technology (ICT) but state they would like them to be used more in lessons. So far, students in Year 7 and 11 have each received a laptop computer for use in school and at home. The academy has not yet embarked to any great extent on developing its work in relation to business and enterprise and it is therefore not yet possible to evaluate the impact of the specialism. Year 7 students particularly enjoyed presenting their business ideas in competitions like the 'Dragons' Den', finding such activity helpful in developing their confidence and presentation skills.

Inspectors did not explore the quality of provision available to students within the extended day programme that currently runs on Tuesdays. This provision is seen by the academy as the key point of its extra-curricular programme.

Students receive good care, support and guidance from committed and skilled staff who seek constantly to improve educational provision. Procedures for the vetting of staff and visitors meet government requirements. Pastoral care is given a high priority and students are guided to make wise choices about their future. The academy engages with a wide range of external agencies to ensure that the right support is provided for the most vulnerable students. This partnership work is another strength and is much valued by students. Only one student leaving the academy last summer did not move on to other education, employment or training. This impressive outcome reflects the individual care and attention given to students. Support provided by the academy's Oaks Inclusion Centre makes a real difference in helping students who spend time there to manage their own behaviour and improve their learning. The academy is seeking to improve its work with parents, recognising that this is critical in improving attendance, behaviour and attainment. While there are some good systems for improving behaviour, they are not yet sufficiently well developed or refined to ensure that all students develop positive attitudes to learning.

Leadership and management

This academy opened with a much shorter preparation time than existed for many others. This put pressure on leaders and managers in the academy's first year when much development work was still going on. The executive principal, head of school and the senior team provide strong, trusted and respected leadership, working with determination and setting a clear vision for the future, knowing that much remains to be done in a relatively short time to ensure that provision and outcomes for students are as they wish them to be in all respects. Staff are willing to embrace change, to develop their expertise, and share good practice within the academy and across the partnership with Folkestone School for Girls. The academy has, overall, satisfactory capacity to improve further and staff do not underestimate the challenge that lies ahead. Governance has many positive features and brings to bear the considerable experience of many of its members for the benefit of the academy.

Governors and senior staff have made appropriate decisions about priorities for development and are fully aware of the existing strengths in the academy's work and what needs to be improved further. The quality of evaluation, planning for improvement, and taking effective action are particularly good at the senior level but more varied elsewhere. In some areas, further refinements are required in the systems for evaluating students' progress so that all managers are clear about how to support their teams to improve their effectiveness in raising standards. The academy sets challenging targets and senior staff use these well in the drive to improve.

Pending the development of a new building, governors are taking proper steps to ensure that the existing site and accommodation are fit for purpose, although there are several limitations, in science for example, and concerns about the cost of maintaining aging buildings. The academy has experienced some difficulties in recruiting staff over the last two years, most notably in science, but the situation is expected to be much improved from September 2009.

External support

The academy benefits greatly and in many respects from its partnership with Folkestone School for Girls. Several members of staff, both teaching and administrative, work across the two establishments. Staff now being appointed to either the school or the academy have contracts to work in both places. The sharing of such expertise is not only beneficial but cost effective, in the provision of professional development for staff for example. The academy's three sponsors also offer much support in the form of advice and licenses from Microsoft, educational and financial expertise from Tonbridge School and through the community of Kent schools. The academy also values the advice and other contributions from its School Improvement Partner and from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.

Main Judgements

The academy has made satisfactory progress. This visit has raised some concerns about the standard of education provided and the academy's performance will be monitored.

Priorities for further improvement

- Strengthen further the academy's systems for promoting good attendance, attitudes and behaviour so that an increasing proportion of students demonstrate the existing positive attributes of many students.
- Eradicate the marked inconsistencies in the quality of lessons and increase the proportion of good or better ones. Ensure that tasks set are relevant, engage students' interest, are suitably challenging and undertaken with good pace.
- Increase the effectiveness of teachers' responses to students' written and oral work through marking or other means to encourage students' greater pride and

participation in their efforts and raised achievements, and to boost their literacy skills.

- Develop where necessary the leadership and management skills of staff so that they evaluate more effectively the extent of students' learning and use the evaluations to improve quickly provision and outcomes for individuals and groups.

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

Yours sincerely

Viola Hola
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc chair of governors
the Academies Group, DCSF